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The Talent Management Handbook:
*Creating Organizational Excellence by Identifying,
Developing, and Promoting Your Best People*

Chapter 29: Coaching the Superkeepers

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We need to go inside out.
—Mark X. Feck

THIS CHAPTER FOCUSES ON ONE SEGMENT OF THE BURGEONING EXECUTIVE coachee population referred to by Lance Berger as the *Superkeepers.* Coaching Superkeepers is different from coaching other employees. There are aspects of managing these engagements that warrant special consideration if coaching resources are to be spent well and if coached Superkeepers are to receive maximum value from the experience. With an eye toward ensuring the value and quality of Superkeeper coaching, this chapter will focus on:

- A definition of Superkeeper coaching
- Methodological factors that distinguish Superkeeper work from other coaching
- *Meta themes* that enrich a conceptual understanding of Superkeeper coaching

Definition

Superkeeper coaching is defined as a company-sponsored "perk" for top high-potential employees, a customized development process intended to accelerate effectiveness at work. This coaching is based on a collaborative relationship among the employee, his/her boss, his/her human resources manager, and an executive coach.

There are a number of nuances embedded in this definition, beginning with the important point that coaching for Superkeepers must be positioned in the company as an essential "perk." Given the historical context of coaching as a remedial tool, care must be taken to ensure that Superkeepers, as well as others in the company, understand the positive, proactive intention of such coaching. According to Peterson (2002): "Before 1990, a suggestion that a manager needed a coach was invariably perceived as a personal indictment...most people referred to coaching were, in fact, viewed as talented but flawed."

Increasingly, it will be the Superkeepers in companies like pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline who have the opportunity to work with an executive coach, especially at important transition points in their careers. These transition points include *assimilation* upon first joining a company, *stretch* inherent in roles with considerable increase in scope, *acceleration* for speeding up their evolution as top leaders, and *introspection* when they indicate the need to contemplate what they really want to do next career-wise. Tom Kaney, Senior Vice President of Human Resources at GlaxoSmithKline, highlights this use of coaching: "We are reserving executive coaching for just top high-potential individuals—our 'Olympians'—who are the future of the company and who fundamentally understand the more they know about themselves, the more effective they're going to be."

Customization and *collaboration* are two additional nuances with key implications for the successful coaching of Superkeepers. These will be discussed below, under *meta themes*.

Factors That Distinguish the Coaching of Superkeepers from the Coaching of Other Employees

Based on my experience coaching hundreds of Superkeepers from every global sector, as well as on empirical findings (Wasylyshyn, 2003), there are four methodological factors that distinguish the coaching of Superkeepers from that of other employees. The careful orchestration of and commitment to these factors ensure the value and quality of Superkeeper coaching.

These factors are (1) a holistic approach, (2) deep behavioral insight, (3) the active involvement of top corporate executives, and (4) sustained relationships with the coach and/or trusted internal collaborator (usually a senior human resources professional).

In 1985, Mark X. Feck, head of corporate human resources for Rohm and Haas, a *Fortune* 200 company, was asked to create a leader development process for their top high-potential employees. During our discussion of possible designs, methodologies, and tools, he expressed the essence of what it takes to coach Superkeepers well: "We need to go inside out. We need to assess the *whole* person, not just their profile of leadership competencies. We need to have real relationships with these people. They need to *know themselves* and understand what influences their behavior in good times and bad. Their accurate self-awareness is essential for continued learning and personal growth. Continued learning and personal growth are essential for the evolution of world-class leaders." That was the conceptual moment of Rohm and Haas's Leadership 2000 (now Leadership 3000), a psychologically oriented and competency-based leader development process still in existence nearly 20 years later.

The wisdom implicit in Feck's thinking about Superkeeper development—particularly regarding the centrality of self-knowledge—is echoed in contemporary writing on the topic of executive development. Goleman (1998) places self-awareness as the foundational element in his conceptualization of emotional intelligence. He states: "People who assess themselves honestly—that is, self-aware people—are well suited to do the same for the organizations they run." Bossidy and Charan (2002) cite self-knowledge as one of a leader's seven essential behaviors: "Without what we call emotional fortitude, you can't be honest with yourself, deal honestly with business and organizational realities, or give people forthright assessments.... Emotional fortitude comes from self-discovery and self-mastery."

Holistic Approach

A *Fortune* magazine cover story (November 1998) captured an attitudinal shift about work among talented Gen-Xers. On the cover we see a bespectacled young man in a T-shirt with a canary on his head. The headline reads, "Hey, corporate America, I want a sign-on bonus, a cappuccino machine, and I want to bring my pet to work. And guess what, you need me."

While the Nasdaq roller coaster muted the less adaptive aspects of this entitlement attitude, current Superkeepers are often more focused on the *work-life integration* issue than the generations before them. This has become an important consideration in their employer selections. Therefore, customization of Superkeepers' coaching will be enhanced by an exploration

of the intersection between their work and personal priorities. What are those critical points of intersection? Are companies' policies and practices supportive of Superkeepers' commitments to better work-life integration? What can be done to convey that Superkeepers' employers care about them as whole people?

Kevin T., like other executives who had worked in this *Fortune* company's Latin America region, was experiencing heightened stress upon repatriation to the United States. The almost daily tension between Kevin and his wife was escalating to the point that it interfered with his concentration and focus at work, as well as with his sleep. His direct reports had started to comment on his fatigue and disengagement from key day-to-day matters that warranted his attention.

In a meeting with his coach, Kevin confided the situation and his growing concern. The coach, recognizing a pattern he had seen with other repatriation scenarios, suggested Kevin and his wife participate in a "partner module" the coach had created just for Superkeeper couples. The couple agreed and, within a month, the coach was able to help them identify the real issues, put those issues into perspective, create a pragmatic plan to address them, and rediscover the spirit of adventure and hope that had always characterized their relationship. Freed from his personal concerns, Kevin was able to bring the full force of his leadership to his new role.

Working with Superkeepers holistically means coaches have the inclination, skill, and courage to address the critical intersections between work and personal priorities in ways that are appropriate and helpful. It also means companies are willing to support such coach efforts, because they believe the more focus and concentration Superkeepers bring to their work, the more successful they and their companies will be. Superkeepers who believe they must compartmentalize their lives often induce more stress on themselves—and others—than is warranted. Therefore, coaching Superkeepers from a holistic perspective is a strategy for maximizing continued effectiveness. Smart companies will choose coaches well and remain supportive of holistic coaching strategies. These companies will be rewarded with the retention of Superkeepers whose careers might have otherwise been stalled or derailed by personal issues left unattended.

Behavioral Insight

Argyris (1991) wrote in a classic *Harvard Business Review* article: "Every company faces a learning dilemma: the smartest people find it hardest to learn." Since Superkeepers are among the brightest people in an organization, how are they engaged in new learning? Coaching can be a major learning tool—if coaches are focused on the challenge of rapid engagement. One vehi-

cle for rapid engagement is *data*. With their natural penchant for facts and data, Superkeepers can be drawn into new learning with a data-based profile that highlights their core strengths and also provides clues for coaching focus. Business people will work with data—often before they will be engaged in the *relational learning* that typifies the reciprocity between Superkeepers and their coaches. Coaches with backgrounds in the behavioral sciences possess the broadest armamentarium of tools for providing data-based leader profiles. With the understanding that such data is held in confidence between coaches and Superkeepers, coaches who can weave together multiple data points (e.g., themes from a developmental history, a battery of psychometrics, 360 data-gathering, etc.) engage Superkeepers rapidly. This is especially true if the weaving *goes inside out*, i.e., yields fresh, insightful information about the underlying basis of behavior. Such information speeds acceleration for Superkeepers who are intent on getting to their next level of effectiveness.

Ned B., a brilliant R&D leader, had been given performance management feedback many times about his obnoxious, arrogant behavior, especially in meetings where senior executives were present. While he had been perceived as a Superkeeper for many years, he now ran the risk of a career plateau if he didn't adjust his offensive behavior. The threat of a plateau was the coaching "hook" for Ned. Since he told the coach he wanted her to conduct an "excavation" to help him see what he needed to see about his behavior, the coach included the Rorschach inkblot test as part of a battery of psychometric tools. Trained in the use of this projective technique with senior executives, she believed the Rorschach results would help them identify a deeper insight about the underlying basis of his inappropriate behavior. Through the qualitative analysis of Ned's responses to each inkblot, the coach unearthed her client's deep-seated fear of authority figures. Their discussion of this material and how it set off behavior that sabotaged his career prospects proved valuable on a number of fronts. Ned was able to challenge the need for him to continue his attacking behavior as a way of self-protection, better recognize when and why his deep fear button might get pushed in meetings, and use that recognition to censor the behavior that was alienating him from senior management.

Unlike other coachees, Superkeepers are often interested in a deeper, psychological look at themselves as a way of both enhancing self-knowledge and increasing self-management. For this reason, companies are advised to include consulting psychologists in the cadre of coaches they engage for Superkeeper assignments.

Involvement of Top Executives

For all their achievements and confidence—and despite what organizations do to reward and recognize them—Superkeepers can be hypervigilant about

where they stand in the company. Further, this attentiveness can be exacerbated by the tactics of aggressive executive recruiters. Companies that are proactive about retaining their most talented employees recognize the importance of creating opportunities for them to be known to and to interact with top corporate leaders. Superkeeper coaching can assist these efforts. For example, the selection of participants in a Superkeeper's 360 data-gathering sample—assuming the coach gathers the data face to face—presents an opportunity for the coach to deepen senior executives' knowledge of Superkeepers. Coaches should, in ongoing collaboration with company sources (boss and human resources), help identify opportunities that would foster Superkeepers' heightened exposure to corporate leaders.

Further, coaches who have coached senior executives in Superkeepers' companies have accumulated in-depth knowledge/insight about the culture and as such become especially credible in the eyes of Superkeepers. While these coaches must remain mindful of the appropriate boundaries of confidentiality and use good judgment in their comments about succession planning, for example, they nevertheless can be an invaluable resource for keeping things in perspective, especially when Superkeepers question and/or are unduly impatient about their future career prospects.

Janice B. was one of this *Fortune* 100 company's top high-potential employees. Her track record as a "turnaround" specialist was flawless and in her current role she was demonstrating her ability to grow a business as well. Her boss had done all the right things in terms of Janice's level, compensation, and the acknowledgment of her accomplishments. But when Janice received a company announcement about a new round of promotions, she commented to a colleague, "Where am I in all this?" Fortunately, her coach picked this up on the grapevine and was able to signal senior management such that both the CEO and President made special efforts to assure Janice of what an invaluable asset she was and the positive implications of that for her future with the company. This proved to have a palliative effect on Janice and also served to remind her of how she needed to reassure a few of her own Superkeepers regarding their future prospects with the company.

When Superkeeper coaches identify ways to increase their clients' direct interaction with top senior executives, everyone wins. This is reciprocal learning at its best. The Superkeepers deepen their business perspectives and get exposure that can be a retention factor. Senior executives get a closer, more visceral sense of their Superkeepers—an invaluable perspective especially when they have to make quick decisions on key personnel moves.

Sustained Relationships

Superkeeper coaching needs to be a boundary-less process—not a contained program. At its best, Superkeeper coaching is *relational*, not *transactional*.

Superkeepers may commence relationships with their coaches that continue over many years. For myriad reasons, companies are wise to endorse and support such relationships financially.

Ruis C. was one of this *Fortune* company's top five Superkeepers. A technically knowledgeable and charismatic general manager, he was on the short list of potential successors to the current CEO. As a Latin American ex-pat working in the U.S. for several years, he and his family yearned for a rotation back to Latin America, especially during the high school years of their two children. Based on conversations with the CEO, Ruis had reason to believe this could happen. So when a major role in Latin America was filled with another company executive, Ruis was stunned and disappointed and felt betrayed by the CEO. While he was absorbing this disappointment, an executive recruiter called and, for the first time in his career with the company, Ruis called back and soon had a very tempting offer.

While Ruis had started working with his coach four years prior to this time, he maintained a relationship with the coach, who served as an objective sounding board on people-, team-, and career-related issues. Ruis told him what had happened. While preserving the boundaries of their confidential relationship, the coach signaled the CEO about the depth of Ruis's disappointment and urged the CEO to initiate a meeting with Ruis so he could explain fully his decision about the Latin American job and tip his hand a bit regarding upcoming plans for Ruis. This full and far-ranging discussion influenced Ruis's decision to remain with the company and restored his trust in the CEO.

With Superkeepers in particular, there is no substitute for trusting relationships. Such relationships serve as the glue, the oasis, and the open forum—especially when Superkeepers need a safe, objective place to talk through difficult business/career issues. The coaching relationship can also be an antidote to the isolation that occurs as Superkeepers assume positions of greater responsibility. Saporito (1996) writes: "The fact of the matter is, the higher an individual moves in an organization, the less feedback he or she is likely to receive. Senior executives tend to get isolated from real-time, unvarnished feedback about the impact of their individual leadership."

Many companies are fortunate to have an internal resource who can forge the level of deep trust essential for full dialogue on issues—especially as related to thorny business issues and/or the Superkeeper's career aspirations. In the absence of such an internal resource, coaches who have long-standing relationships with companies can fill that need. In the ideal, companies have both, i.e. a partnership between trusted internal and external resources who work together in exquisite candor and harmony to ensure the next generation of a company's leadership.

Meta Themes

Three meta themes are central to a conceptual understanding of excellence in the coaching of Superkeepers. These meta themes are *traction, trust,* and *truth-telling.* Attention to these meta themes is key if meaningful outcomes in the coaching of Superkeepers are to be achieved. How mindful are you of these *meta themes* as you make decisions about and/or participate in Superkeeper coaching engagements? Test yourself by reviewing *meta theme* factors presented in the box just below for *traction, trust,* and *truth-telling* respectively in making sure coaching Superkeepers takes hold.

Traction

- "Rightness" of the coaching referral
- Time—Superkeeper has sufficient time, timing is right
- Superkeeper participation in choice of coach
- A collaborative coaching model
- Customization of coaching
- Coach maintains momentum

Trust

- Confidentiality
- Superkeeper as client
- Emotional competence of coach
- Positioning of coaching in the company
- Superkeeper capacity for forming working alliance with coach
- Coach knowledge of business and company culture

Truth-Telling

- Coach uses "double-mirror"—individual feedback to Superkeeper, culture-based feedback and contextual observations to company (boss and HR)
- Candor of company sources—boss and HR "collaborators"
- Coach's ability to receive tough feedback
- Coach's courage, skill in providing Superkeeper with feedback, insightful observations/behavioral interpretations
- Coach's courage, skill in giving straight talk to Superkeeper's boss and HR "collaborators"

Traction

What's meant by *traction* in the coaching of Superkeepers? Think tires, think roads: think tires on pavement gripping the surface while moving and with-

out slipping. This is the essence of Superkeeper effectiveness: *moving without slipping.* Superkeepers personify rock-steady momentum in decision-making, progress, competitive advantage, and results.

Rightness of Coaching

The cardinal *traction* factor in coaching Superkeepers is the "rightness" of the coaching referral. Not every Superkeeper is motivated to participate in coaching and coaching is not the right development resource for every Superkeeper. Both the company decision maker(s) and the coach need to be satisfied that the Superkeeper is truly motivated to participate.

Some years ago a human resources colleague conveyed this anecdote about a brilliant marketing executive who joined his *Fortune* company. In an executive assimilation exercise, this executive was asked how he saw himself adjusting to his new company's culture—admittedly very different from the one whence he came. The executive's response was "No, you don't understand. The real question is not how I'm going to adjust to this company; the question is how is this company going to adjust to me?"

The postscript to this story is that this executive reluctantly agreed to work with an executive coach—someone with an international reputation for working well with senior executives. While the executive was truly a Superkeeper, the coach made little headway because of his client's total lack of motivation to participate. The executive agreed to participate only because the CEO wanted him to; therefore, he resented the coach's presence. With no appetite for new learning, his inflated sense of self and egocentrism overwhelmed objective self-appraisal about his impact on others. He personified the darker side of the narcissistic leader.

According to Maccoby (2000): "Companies need leaders who do not try to anticipate the future so much as create it. But narcissistic leaders—even the most productive of them—can self-destruct and lead their organizations terribly astray. For companies whose narcissistic leaders recognize their limitations, these will be the best of times. For other companies, these could turn out to be the worst."

Good Timing and Quality Time for Coaching

Superkeepers who understand the potential value from coaching are receptive to the idea of working with a coach. They will often request one—when they join a new company, take on roles that constitute significant stretch, lead their first turnaround situation, do a function-to-general-management shift, adjust to an expatriate assignment, etc. These coachees are prepared to give the coaching the *quality time* it requires—another key *traction* factor.

The *timing of coaching* is another important *traction* factor. Like any premium learning or change experience, the individual must have sufficient time to immerse himself/herself into it fully.

Jack, a brilliant field operations executive, was expected to be promoted to president reporting to the CEO, a former operations whiz. While the CEO would likely not be retiring anytime in the near future, the elevation of Jack to president was generally seen as a first step in a succession plan. At the point of his appointment, Jack agreed with the board, CEO, and corporate head of human resources that working with a coach would be helpful to his settling into the new role.

This just-in-time coaching proved useful in myriad ways—but particularly at the outset when the coach helped the new president see his most critical task: managing the complex dynamics of his relationship with his boss, the CEO. In the absence of that coaching guidance, Jack would have forged ahead on key operations issues—issues on which his boss and he did not have philosophical alignment.

Participation in Choice of Coach

Once Superkeepers have decided to work with a coach, the next step is to manage the alchemy such that they feel party to the decision on which coach. Coaching *traction* is helped significantly when Superkeepers participate in the selection of their coaches. Armed with information about core coach competencies and training requirements (see Brotman, Liberi, and Wasylyshyn 1998), Superkeepers are advised to interview two or three prospective coaches. Further, companies are wise to provide approved lists of qualified coaches and to cultivate long-term relationships with those coaches. In addition to having a depth and breadth of experience with Superkeepers, qualified coaches will have (or will be building) knowledge of the company culture and of its senior executive population. This contextual grounding is invaluable in coaching of Superkeepers.

In their meetings with prospective coaches, Superkeepers are advised to probe a number of factors, including the coach's (1) experience with other Superkeepers and willingness for the prospective coachee to speak to them, (2) professional credibility, (3) methodology, (4) handling of confidentiality, (5) assessment of what would be helpful to the individual, and (6) the chemistry.

The importance of chemistry cannot be overstated—given the relational nature of coaching Superkeepers well. There are literally thousands of coaches—from former executives to schoolteachers and communications experts. There are objective and subjective criteria that need to be screened carefully. The objective part revolves around the nature of the coaching agenda. Is it a discrete piece of learning—about the cultural subtleties and nuances, for example, of working in the Asia Pacific region? For this type of engagement, someone who has consulted or managed in that business environment would be ideal. Is it a behavior change? For example, does a hard-driving, turnaround Superkeeper need to make the style adjustments needed to run a regional, highly matrixed organization? In this instance, someone trained in the behav-

ioral sciences with sufficient business perspective would bring more tools to the development agenda than someone without these competencies.

The subjective part is about the chemistry between people. Wasylyshyn's (2003) research on personal coach characteristics cited the following factors as most key: (1) the ability to form a strong connection (empathy, warmth, listening, fosters trust, quick rapport), (2) professionalism (intelligence, integrity/honesty, management of confidentiality, objectivity), and (3) sound coaching methodology (delivers "truth" constructively, contextual grounding, unearths core issues, use of psychometrics).

A Collaborative Model

Coaching Superkeepers is best accomplished through collaboration of the Superkeeper's boss, the human resources partner, and the coach. The coach must manage this collaboration, setting its tone at the outset of the work by ensuring clarity of roles, expectations, timeline, methodology, coaching agenda, and the boundaries of confidentiality. The coaching is enriched immeasurably by the coach's ready access to the boss and HR professional in order to build a deep and rich contextual grounding. A steady stream of collateral information will also be invaluable to the process. In this collaborative scheme, the coach can also capitalize on opportunities to provide the boss with "secondary gain," i.e., cues regarding important issues related to the Superkeeper's success, aspirations, any concerns, etc. In this model, coaches are more likely to remain current on contextual information they need to be maximally effective not only with the Superkeeper but within the organizational system.

The natural flow of communication inherent in a collaborative coaching relationship minimizes any sense on the part of the coach—and the company—of "not being in the loop." However, coaches must remain vigilant regarding the judgment calls they make about what does/does not get shared with the company in terms of coaching session content. For example, what do coaches do when they know a recruiter has tempted a Superkeeper to look at an opportunity elsewhere?

As a top high-potential employee, Steve T. ran one of his company's most successful business units. While recently promoted, he was not happy with his compensation package relative to peers in similar roles in other companies, so when the recruiter called, Steve was willing to listen. He had been working with a coach for two years and their trust was sufficient for him to tell her about the situation. She created a "stay-go" exercise that he used to rate all key work-related and personal factors. The exercise punctuated his desire to stay with the company due to culture, ongoing opportunity, and family lifestyle factors. With the coach he also identified a strategy that resulted in a satisfactory discussion of his compensation with his boss. In the

debrief of the entire episode, they discussed what they might have done if he had decided to leave the company. The coach said she would have sought his permission to signal the company that he was tempted to respond to a recruiter's call, thus giving his boss an opportunity to initiate retention dialogue. Steve indicated he would not have considered that action a breach of their confidentiality agreement.

Customization

Every Superkeeper coaching assignment must be customized to address the subtleties and nuances that typify the challenges of helping talented people learn and achieve personal growth. *Traction* will be seriously compromised, if not lost, when a Superkeeper senses a programmatic, off-the-shelf experience. With customization as the critical caveat, there is a structure to sound Superkeeper coaching that typically consists of four interrelated phases: (1) data gathering, (2) feedback, (3) coaching, and (4) consolidation.

In the data-gathering phase, the coach will use an array of tools to draw information that will be useful to the coaching agenda that has been established with the Superkeeper. These tools can include a life history, a battery of psychometrics, company input based on an established set of leadership competencies, in-depth conversations with key stakeholders in the company, shadowing of the Superkeeper, etc. The goal of this customized data gathering is always to illuminate key factors that have implications for the individual's accelerated success.

In the feedback phase, it is incumbent upon the coach to weave together all data points in a manner that engages the Superkeeper in a deeper observation and understanding of himself/herself. Such feedback can also inform and enrich the coaching agenda with new learning and/or behavioral insight.

In the coaching phase, Superkeeper and coach remain focused on the established objectives, maintain frequency of contact, and conclude with an action plan that captures key learnings and actions that ensure the Superkeeper continuing to benefit from the coaching work. The coach will also maintain frequency of contact with company collaborators.

In the consolidation phase, coaches maintain contact with Superkeepers on an as-needed basis. In addition, there will be opportunities to punctuate accrued learnings by sending Superkeepers suggestions about relevant business reading, news stories, films, books, poetry, etc. In short, coaches of Superkeepers remain vigilant for *anything* that they know would continue to support the investment their clients made in accelerating their personal growth and new learning.

Maintaining Momentum

The timeline in Superkeeper coaching can—and should—vary enormously, given the customized nature of this work. Some engagements last a few

months, some several, and it is not unusual for Superkeepers to want to continue their coaching relationships—as do athletes—over an extended period. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, companies are wise to support these relationships. Regardless of the length of the coaching relationship, coaches must be flexible and tenacious enough to maintain sufficient momentum for the coaching to "take" (have *traction*) initially and to add increasing value over time.

Trust

In the context of coaching Superkeepers, this meta theme connotes a *reciprocal trusting,* not just between the coach and coachee but with two primary collaborators as well—the Superkeeper's bosses and human resources partners. All parties are committed to the success of the development activity and believe in each other's honesty and reliability in doing what needs to be done to deliver on the objectives of a clear coaching agenda.

Confidentiality—Who's the Client?

Confidentiality is another significant *trust* factor. Any consideration of this factor must begin with the core question, *Who's the client?* The working alliance with Superkeepers is enhanced when coaches view Superkeepers—not the sponsoring organization—as the clients. Wasylyshyn (2003) states: "In terms of forming strong connections with clients, coaches who work from a perspective of the *executive as the client* (versus the organization as client) are likely to form faster and more trusting coaching relationships. Seasoned coaches discover how to work from this perspective—satisfying both the coached executive and the sponsoring organization."

The issue of confidentiality must be addressed at the outset of coaching. Ideally, this should be accomplished in a "live" meeting with Superkeepers and company "collaborators" present. In this meeting, coaches state the boundaries of confidentiality. Specifically, and in the spirit of the *Superkeeper as client,* this means the following information would be kept in confidence between Superkeeper and coach: personal history, psychometric data, and content from coaching sessions. It is understood that the coach would need to share certain information with the boss and/or human resources partner—so they can function fully in their roles as "collaborators" in the coaching. Information of this type would include thematic material from 360 data gathering and a general sense of how the coaching is progressing.

As hardy and confident as Superkeepers typically are, they can also be hypervigilant regarding organizational political factors, what coaches learn about them, and the implications of this information for their careers. Therefore, it is incumbent upon their coaches not only to establish the boundaries of confidentiality at the onset but to stay focused on this issue through the coaching so there is never any question in the Superkeeper's mind about it.

Emotional Competence

Managing the meta theme of *trust* in a coaching relationship requires that the coach, in particular, possess a high degree of emotional competence. Emotional competence is defined as the awareness of and ability to manage one's emotions. The four dimensions of emotional competence captured in the author's acronym, SO SMART, are self-observation, self-management, attunement to others, and relationship traction, i.e., the ability to form and maintain meaningful relationships.

Surely emotional competence is central in the skill set of any coach. Coaches of Superkeepers, however, will do distinctive work if this is a strength. Specifically, emotional competence will aid coaches as they strive to maintain objectivity about their clients, seize opportunities to link clients' work and personal realities, and proceed with courage to make interpretations that deepen behavioral insights. Strong emotional competence also influences the likelihood of coaches being attuned to opportunities (or the creation of opportunities) for their clients' exposure to senior management. Further, emotionally competent coaches can inspire their clients and build strong bonds that can be a source for objective reality-testing over time.

Ideally, the Superkeeper-coach dynamic is *relational*, not *transactional*. This is not to say that every Superkeeper will be the best relational learner. However, Superkeepers in general need to know their coaches *are there for them*, i.e., these coaches are committed to doing whatever needs to be done to ensure that the Superkeepers continue to succeed. The power of this relational connection can be heard in the following anecdote.

Larry E., in an unexpected moment of vulnerability and self-disclosure, told his coach several years later that there were times when he (Larry) was working in the Asia Pacific region when he called the coach late at night—just to hear the reassuring tone of his voicemail message.

Additional Trust Aspects

There are a number of other key considerations in ensuring *trust* in the collaborative approach to coaching Superkeepers. These considerations are captured in the following questions:

- Will company collaborators (boss and human resources professional) be as open and accessible as they need to be?
- Will company collaborators respect the boundaries of confidentiality as established by the coach at the outset of the coaching engagement?
- Have the internal collaborators done what they need to do to position one-to-one coaching as a special "perk" for Superkeepers?
- Is the Superkeeper capable of forming a close working alliance with a coach?

- Since learning and/or behavior change are the hallmarks of successful coaching, will the Superkeeper feel comfortable enough in the coaching relationship to display vulnerability? To shed defenses? To explore "blind spots" or biases? To discuss the tension in the interaction between work and personal priorities?
- Will the coachee make his/her coaching a priority, i.e., get full value of this development tool despite tough, ongoing business pressure?
- Does the coach know enough about business to be practical and focus on business imperatives, as well as on forming a respectful and empathic relationship with the Superkeeper?

Truth-Telling

Even gifted Superkeepers need *truth-telling*, i.e. an accurate read on how they're perceived in the organization. If it's all positive, it deepens affirmation and becomes an invaluable resource for increasing their internal locus of control. If there's any negative input, it becomes invaluable grist for the mill and can help focus a coaching agenda. If it's mixed, it can ignite an honest appraisal of truth and clue Superkeepers to issues within important stakeholder groups that warrant their attention.

For seasoned coaches, the *truth-telling* meta theme necessitates the use of a "double mirror." The "double mirror" metaphor connotes the simultaneous process of helping individuals see themselves as they are perceived in the organization while also helping the organization see important systemic considerations. Effective coaching of Superkeepers cannot be done in a vacuum. Clarification of the interaction between self and contextual factors is key to a credible and full coaching process.

Here are critical questions in assessing *truth-telling:*

- Will the coach's collaborative partners (boss and HR manager) be fully candid at the outset of the coaching engagement—even if that means the talented Superkeeper hearing for the first time something that is less than glowing?
- Is the coach willing to take/seek direct, tough feedback from his/her client?
- How courageous is the coach? Given how crucial Superkeepers are to the future of their organizations, can the coach be nimble, diplomatic, inspirational, and courageous enough to help these individuals hear whatever they need to hear—in a manner that doesn't alienate the Superkeeper from the company?
- Is the coach willing to deliver tough feedback to the company—even when it may mean risking future business in that company?

Conclusion

Coaching Superkeepers is different from coaching other employees. This difference is represented by four methodology factors: (1) a holistic approach, (2) the unearthing of deep behavioral insight, (3) the active involvement of top executives, and (4) sustained relationships with the coach and/or trusted internal (company) person. This difference is also illuminated by the consideration of three coaching process or *meta themes* for effective Superkeeper coaching: (1) traction, (2) trust, and (3) truth-telling. Further, as we examine the interaction of these methodology and process considerations, we find that the coaching of Superkeepers has implications for a number of crucial talent management processes. These processes include recruitment and branding (the ability to attract other Superkeepers), retention of key talent, succession planning, talent deployment, and leadership development.

Is there a corollary between the most coached people in the world—professional athletes—and Superkeepers? Aside from natural ability, there is one essential thing that Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, Florence Joyner, and other successful athletes have in common: each was *coached* to greatness. They would not have achieved the heights in their careers on the strength of their natural gifts alone. Should every Superkeeper who is sufficiently motivated to work with a coach have one?

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