

**Emotional Competence: Preliminary Results of a Coaching Program  
Commissioned by Rohm and Haas Company**

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## **Emotional Competence: Preliminary Results of a Coaching Program Commissioned by Rohm and Haas Company**

Business historians are likely to describe the last 25 years as a time when leaders' behavior - how they lead – assumed particular prominence in the mix of key factors for leadership success. Publications by Goleman (1998, 2000, 2002), Cherniss (2001), Collins (2001), and Bossidy and Charan (2002) all make this point. And a significant body of research findings, including Boyatzis (1982), Rosier (1994), and Chen and Jacobs (1997), makes the business case for the importance of this behavioral dimension of leadership.

Critical Business development continue to underscore the importance of leader behavior as a core determinant of overall effectiveness. These developments include intensified business competition, electronic advances, rapid technological change, globalization, outsourcing/offshoring, higher energy needs, workplace diversity, environmental turbulence, and eroding psychological/physical safety. Surely these developments have strategic implications for the next generation of human resource activities.

The emphasis on leader behavior is perhaps most apparent in leadership development initiatives--especially among companies allocating resources for coaching; however given the plethora of external coaching programs and variable skills of executive coaches, how do companies get maximum value from this investment? Also, how do companies pierce the cynicism of managers and leaders who fundamentally believe that people, like tigers, do not ever *really* change their stripes? The story of a high impact, behaviorally-based coaching program implemented by Rohm and Haas Company may provide some helpful insights. In this article we describe the program, its referral process, and the results of recent outcome research.

### **Background**

In the mid 1990s Rohm and Haas Company, a *Fortune* global leader in the specialty materials industry, decided to include a more specific focus on leader behaviors in its leadership competency model--referred to as the "You" dimension. The new model represented an integration of cognitive, technical and experiential factors with key behavioral and emotional factors, i.e., emotional competence. In this context emotional competence is defined as the *awareness* of one's own and others' feelings, and using that awareness to *manage* feelings as a constructive resource in achieving work objectives.

This leadership competency model, intended to enrich development planning, was well received by line managers and human resource leaders throughout the world. They found it user friendly and value-added in that competency information was readily surfaced and converted into actionable development plans. However, within months of the model's rollout, a persistent question emerged: "What do we do when the development need is in the YOU dimension itself?"

J. Michael ("Mike") Fitzpatrick, current Rohm and Haas President and COO, was first to identify the need for a coaching process explicitly focused on the development of emotional competence. Soon thereafter, a customized program named VISTA was piloted. Since 1996 there have been over fifty participants, and VISTA continues to be used as a development resource for people who have the potential to reach executive level roles in the company.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The company recently revised its leadership profile, but the behavioral dimension is clearly represented in a cluster of three competencies grouped under Interpersonal Effectiveness. These competencies are: (1) Effectiveness with

## The Vista Model

VISTA is a four-phase, collaborative coaching process that ideally involves the participant's boss and human resources partner as well as the participant and his/her coach. VISTA coaches are external consulting psychologists.<sup>2</sup> While appropriate boundaries of confidentiality are maintained, frequent interactions among the four partners ensure focus on the right issues, provide helpful collateral information to the coach, give the coach opportunities to provide guidance to the boss and/or HR partner, and serve as ongoing reality checks on a participant's progress.

The four phases of VISTA typically involve 40-50 hours of direct service provided over a 9-12 month period. These phases are: (1) data-gathering, (2) feedback, (3) coaching, and (4) follow-up. While this may appear similar to other coaching models, there are inherent differences designed to deliver psychological insight and sustained behavioral change the hallmarks of VISTA. These differences include strong internal-external collaboration, multi-faceted data gathering, sufficient time for participants to practice and receive reinforcement for new behavior, and the handling of confidentiality, i.e. VISTA participants are the "clients." In addition, VISTA coaches attend a monthly case conference to ensure their work is informed by key Rohm and Haas culture factors. This meeting is facilitated by one of the authors (Wasylyshyn) who has consulted to the corporation for nearly twenty years.

### *Data-Gathering*

In the data-gathering phase VISTA coaches facilitate an agenda-setting meeting and use a variety of tools: a life development history, a battery of psychometrics, and a customized 360-interview protocol focused on the four dimensions of emotional competence (self observation, self management, attunement, and relationship traction). The goal of this phase is to surface sufficient relevant information, quickly preparing the way for a comprehensive feedback phase. While labor intensive, this data gathering increases the likelihood of unearthing important insights that fuel the coaching agenda. Unlike most 360 data-gathering processes, VISTA data is drawn "live" in face-to-face interviews whenever possible, further enriching the quality of behavioral information as well as the potential for identifying key psychological insights.

### *Feedback*

In a three-hour meeting, findings from each data source are discussed and a synthesis of major findings is achieved. The objectives of the feedback discussion are first, to identify specific behaviors related to emotional competence for focus in the coaching phase; second, to gain insight into the underlying basis of these behaviors; and third to build a strong working alliance between the participant and his/her coach.

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Others (building/maintaining relationships with key internal and external stakeholders, social ease, poise in the face of adversity and/or pressure, handling ambiguity, empathy, trustworthiness, and conflict management skill); (2) Self-Awareness and Self-Management (self confidence, emotional self-control, realistic appraisal of personal strengths and weaknesses, optimism, resilience, and using emotions to drive results and change); and (3) Broad View of the World (natural curiosity and appetite for learning, managing complexity, understanding other cultures, and commitment to use cultural learning and sensitivity to foster mutual goals/relationships).

<sup>2</sup> The authors comprised the external consulting team at Rohm and Haas.

## ***Coaching***

Based on key findings in the feedback, the coaching phase begins with the VISTA participant and his/her coach crafting a preliminary action plan. Using this plan as a foundation, further input is sought from the boss and human resources partner. Subsequent coaching meetings focus on identifying additional insights and adaptive behaviors (generally outside of the participant's comfort zone) for each coaching goal. The primary objective is to expand the participant's versatility for handling a broad range of business and/or management situations in a more emotionally smart manner. Coaching meetings are often supplemented with homework in the form of role plays, case studies, films/DVDs, journaling, and targeted readings.

The periods between coaching meetings serve as "lab time" for participants to apply learning, experiment with new behaviors, and discover what "works" for them in the contextual realities of their work role/situation. Strategies to address potential "relapses" are also identified, further increasing the likelihood of sustaining learning and/or behavior changes over time.

The coaching phase is concluded by the participant fleshing out his/her preliminary action plan to reflect what was learned and ways to continue to support specific behavior change efforts. This document, now referred to as the "master action plan" (MAP), is presented by the participant in a wrap-up meeting with his/her boss, the HR partner and the coach in attendance. This meeting also provides the participant with an opportunity to describe the impact VISTA has had on his/her growth as a leader, and to receive feedback regarding others' awareness of behavior changed and increased leadership effectiveness. Other professional development needs may be discussed, as well as how the boss and/or HR partner can help the individual sustain gains – absent the structure of coaching meetings.

## ***Follow-Up***

In the follow-up phase, the coach remains available for consultation as the participant seeks to solidify and build on VISTA coaching gains. Approximately four months after the wrap-up meeting, the coach contacts the participant, boss and HR partner to gauge progress and determine if any additional support is required. In some instances participants have, with the approval of their bosses, contracted with their coaches for additional coaching support.

## **Importance of the Referral Process**

Extensive efforts have been made to "brand" VISTA as the developmental resource it was designed to be. Given its *behavioral* focus, it is easy for VISTA to be misperceived as a remedial intervention. For this reason, there is rigorous scrutiny of key referral criteria, and a carefully orchestrated referral process has been put in place, as follows:

- Boss and HR partner identify emotional competence as an individual's leadership development opportunity.
- HR partner discusses potential VISTA referral with one of the authors who serves in a quality oversight role for all VISTA referrals. Four criteria must be met:
  1. The individual is a high potential employee with NO performance problems.
  2. The development need is emotional competence.
  3. The individual has had direct feedback from his/her boss and HR partner, and he/she values the importance of emotional competence for effective leadership.
  4. The individual understands VISTA is an investment in his/her development, and he/she is truly motivated to participate in coaching.

- Assuming VISTA is deemed an appropriate resource, boss and/or human resources partner convey this news to the prospective participant.
- Assigned coach contacts VISTA participant to introduce him or herself, review the VISTA process, and answer any questions.
- Coach sets up an agenda-setting meeting with VISTA participant, boss, and HR partner. The four objectives of the agenda-setting meeting are to:
  1. ensure mutual understanding of the program and each person's role in it;
  2. set the boundaries of confidentiality, i.e., what information remains private between the participant and coach and what information is shared with the company;
  3. hear the company's perspective of the participant's strengths and development needs in the area of emotional competence, as well as what VISTA success will look like; and
  4. identify a representative sample of people for 360 data-gathering.
- Prior to the agenda-setting meeting, coach consults separately with the boss and HR partner to address any questions and to ensure the objectives for the meeting are clear.
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## **SURVEY RESULTS**

### **Method**

In 2003, the coaching team decided to survey early VISTA participants. Surveys were mailed to thirty-three of the forty-one VISTA participants who had completed the coaching between 1996 and 2002. Eight participants who had left the company were not included in the study primarily because their whereabouts were unknown. Nearly 50% of the VISTA participants were in the Research organization, about a third in business roles, and the remainder in Information Technology and Operations/Engineering. This array of functional backgrounds is not atypical for a strong technology-based company.

The coaches were particularly interested in going beyond customary self-report data to include feedback from others who could provide outside perspective regarding the sustainability of behavior change and/or learning over time. After securing the participants' permission, surveys were sent to current and former bosses (the boss when the participant went through VISTA) and/or their human resources partners. Completion of the survey for all was strictly voluntary.

The survey instrument was composed of several rating scales as well as a number of open-ended items. In the initial section, VISTA participants and their company partners rated progress made in the agreed upon coaching areas. To accomplish this, each survey was customized to reflect a participant's specific development goals. Participants and Others rated progress on each goal, using a 1-10 rating scale, where 1 equaled very little progress and 10 equaled a great deal of progress.

All surveys asked for a rating (from 1-10) of the sustainability of the participants' overall learning and/or behavior change derived from VISTA. Respondents were offered the opportunity to write in comments or give examples for each of the rating scales.

Five open-ended questions examined the impact of VISTA on a participant's effectiveness as a leader and ability to achieve desired results, on specific benefits the company derived from the individual's participation in VISTA, on the most helpful aspects of the VISTA process, and on ways in which VISTA might be improved.

### **Responses**

The response rate among the thirty-three VISTA participants surveyed was 90.3%. Of these respondents 83% were male and 17% female. The response rate from the forty-four company partners surveyed was considerably less (38.6%). To a large degree this was a function of their no longer having contact with VISTA participants who were now in different roles since the coaching occurred.

### **Development Themes and Results**

Analysis of participants' development goals, as set in the feedback phase, clustered under three major themes: an increase in overall emotional competence, greater awareness of impact on others and more effective career management.

#### *Emotional Competence*

VISTA participants who wanted to increase emotional competence (52%) made progress by learning Goleman's (1995) formulation of this construct – as it relates to effectiveness at work.

#### *Awareness of Impact*

VISTA participants who focused on gaining greater awareness of their impact on others (29%) benefited most from clarity about their respective communication styles. The coaching helped them focus on both verbal and non-verbal behaviors, i.e., eliminating counterproductive or distracting behaviors, and reinforcing those that amplified effective communication.

#### *Career Management*

Effective career management had not emerged in the referral stage for any of the VISTA participants but it clearly surfaced in the coaching phase as an issue of concern for some (19%). While this is not an emotional competence issue per se, coaching gains were made through assistance with career navigation tactics. This finding suggests the need for more frequent and substantive career planning discussions among managers and high potential subordinates.

### **Progress on Vista Goals**

VISTA participants were asked to rate their progress compared to pre-VISTA levels on each of their coaching goals on a 1-10 scale (10 = highest rating). The median rating (across 96 ratings overall) for both VISTA participants and others (boss/HR partner) was 7. Participants and "other" ratings were congruent (plus or minus 1 on the 10-point scale) 78% of the time.

These positive findings are attributed to: (1) multi-faceted data-gathering; (2) breakthrough insights and the identification of specific coaching goals; (3) the collaborative coaching model; (4) the preliminary action plan, i.e., a tool for grounding the coaching work at the outset and an explicit action plan crafted at the end of coaching to support continued progress; and (5) coaches themselves modeling emotional competence. In addition, ongoing company-based activities helped reinforce positive VISTA outcomes. These activities included enriched job experiences, informal mentoring, and more focused performance management.

### **Sustainability**

Over half (52%) of the participants reported high sustainability of the learning and/or behavior change achieved as a result of their participation in VISTA. A medium level of sustainability was indicated by the remaining 48%. Of note is the fact that the majority of participants had maintained their progress since completing the VISTA, and that of the forty-one participants remaining in Rohm and Haas, 70% have advanced in their careers. Managers rated sustainability as high in 60% of the VISTA engagements, and as medium in 35%. The remaining 5% was based on the response of one manager who noted no change.

With 100% of participants and 95% of their managers and/or HR partners reporting medium to high sustainability, it appears that VISTA is an effective coaching model. While these are very preliminary data, we believe this high sustainability finding can be attributed to two factors. First, treating the *participants as the clients* produces a strong, trusting working alliance that ultimately intensifies the quality of the work. Wasylyshyn (2003) wrote, "...coaches who work from the perspective of the executive as the client are likely to form faster and more substantive coaching relationships. Seasoned coaches learn how to work from this perspective – satisfying both the coached executive and the sponsoring organization." Second, the scrutiny of potential participants, i.e., ensuring that VISTA was the right development resource, yielded a well-motivated group of participants.

### **Benefit to the Company**

VISTA participants cited the following as major benefits to the company: (1) becoming more effective leaders (providing vision and inspiration to others); (2) improved interpersonal skills (enhanced listening, achieving more buy-in and alignment, ability to relate to a more diverse group of people); (3) increased commitment to the company; (4) increased performance management skill (providing more timely feedback, earlier identification of potential "derailment factors"); (5) increased productivity; and (6) positive impact on the company's bottom line (better negotiating ability in high stress situations). In turn, managers and HR partners cited the following company benefits: more effective leaders, increased focus resulting in speed to market, better interpersonal skills, and the retention of valued employees.

Thus far, it appears that coaching in the area of emotional competence has proven to be a valuable developmental investment at Rohm and Haas. Given the relational nature of this company's culture, it is likely that emotional competence will continue to be one of the factors that distinguishes stellar performers from others.

### **Program Critique**

In critiquing the program, VISTA participants indicated it had essentially fulfilled its behavioral objectives and that it was helpful to know that the company would want to invest in their development. Others (bosses and HR partners) noted that the program had been helpful to participants in becoming more effective leaders, achieving better results, and growing and developing personally.

A number of suggestions for improvement were offered to fine tune the program. These included: (1) a formal check-in or review a year or two post-VISTA participation; (2) some type of ongoing support; (3) continued screening of participants to assure VISTA remained branded as a development tool; (4) ensuring the representativeness of 360 sample participants; (5) greater involvement of participants' managers so they could see and acknowledge behavior changes; (6) greater involvement of HR partners; and (7) cultural sensitivity to avoid VISTA being perceived as "Ameri-centric."

Finally, the feedback indicated that in certain cases it would be useful to conduct a brief round of 360 data-gathering at the end of the coaching. This could serve as a "reality check" regarding how closely the participant's sense of change is aligned with what other key individuals in the organization perceive. This information could also help specify actions in the master action plan.

## Conclusion

That Rohm and Haas Company would seize upon the relevance of emotional competence and commission the development of a customized coaching resource was an innovative step in 1996 when there were few, if any, programs of this type. But it was not a surprising one in that the company had been focused on the emotional dimension of leadership since 1985 when it implemented a competency-based leadership development model (Leadership 3000) that is holistic and insight-oriented. Based on these early data, Rohm and Haas plans to expand its use of VISTA while also making process adjustments that will strengthen its utility as a development resource. These process adjustments include ensuring the participation of a human resources partner in *every* VISTA, and linking the VISTA work to existing company talent review and performance management activities.

Clearly, the behavior of individual business leaders has reached prominence on a par with cognitive, experiential and technical criteria as essential for successful leadership. Companies that want to enrich this dimension of their leadership evolution initiatives may find coaching that focuses specifically on the development of emotional competence a worthwhile investment. This article has described one company's experience doing just that.

Finally, our experience at Rohm and Haas raises numerous questions that warrant further exploration: What can companies do to ensure the *developmental* branding of programs focused on the subjective area of leader *behavior*? What existing company practices can be leveraged to help sustain the progress people make through coaching of this type? How might companies provide cost-effective, high impact development activity focused on behavior to employees at lower levels in an organization? And finally, from a perspective of cultural diversity, how can behavioral development needs be best met in differing global sectors?

We'd welcome your thoughts.

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**Exhibit 1: Leadership Competency Model - The “You” Dimension**

