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Coaching for Actuaries—
Mini Case Studies

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Editor's Note: In the February 2015 issue of The Stepping Stone,[1] *Michele presented a model for how an actuary might evaluate whether coaching might be an effective approach to improving one's career. In this follow-up, she presents three case studies of how coaching changed the game in real-life situations. Names have been changed to preserve her clients' anonymity.*

The following three coaching examples were taken from real situations. The strategies that worked for these individuals are directly linked to their personal goals, personality types and communication styles.

CASE # 1—BARB: WIN-WIN

Barb, CFO of a national financial institution, was dreading an upcoming meeting with her colleague, Dan, who was the head of human resources (HR). Whenever Barb talked about implementing cost-saving exercises, Dan accused her of not caring about the employees' welfare. Twice he publicly berated her over this matter, and now she was presenting an expense reduction initiative affecting staff. Barb wanted to increase her confidence before the management meeting so she could go in strong and force her solution.

As we probed further, it became clear to Barb that what she really wanted from Dan and the management team was to have a healthy conversation about the issue and gather more information before jumping to a hasty solution. She admitted feeling defensive and this was influencing her approach. We defined what a successful outcome of the meeting would be: Barb wanted her whole management group to engage in solving the problem together as opposed to forcing her own ideas. By shifting her focus from her negative feelings to achieving that goal, Barb had a highly successful meeting and got the results she needed.

Barb reflected that the strategy we developed was completely different than she was expecting. Since that meeting, Barb looks at every work interaction differently. Instead of feeling defensive when people respond negatively, she focuses on what she needs from each situation. Recently Barb conducted her most successful team meeting to date, where her team had a very rich and fruitful discussion, and which she attributed to her new outlook.

CASE #2—BEN: THINK ON THE SPOT

Ben, an up-and-coming pricing actuary for a key product line, aspired to fulfill a leadership role. He wanted to improve his presence in meetings and achieve his ideal state of feeling comfortable and confident. We determined that it was his need to prove himself as the technical expert that prevented him from reaching his goal. Ben felt pressure to impart every detail he knew about a topic and to present a solution whenever an issue arose about his product line. As a result, he spoke too much and too quickly in meeting situations and was anything but comfortable and confident.

We developed strategies for Ben to immediately alter his behavior. Short-term solutions included learning to be comfortable with silence, taking notes during meetings to avoid worrying about missing details, and pruning back the number of his words so the important points could shine through.

Ultimately, we had to get to the root of what was causing his behavior so the changes could be sustainable. Ben had to let go of proving he was the smartest in the room. He had to hone his listening skills, which meant focusing on what others were saying instead of thinking about his brilliant response. After each meeting, Ben documented what worked well and what didn't, and we have tweaked his strategies over time.

Ben's meetings are now much more productive. His staff participates more, which is developing his leaders. Another unexpected benefit is that he has reduced unnecessary follow-up work. Previously, in his quest to quickly provide a solution, he would offer to bring information or results back to the group. By being mindful of his speech, he discovered that some issues resolve themselves in meetings if he is patient enough to let others speak first.

CASE #3—JESSICA: CAREER DECISION

Jessica was choosing between two jobs within the same organization. She was passionate about her current role, but felt that people expected her to accept a stretch assignment to lead a new initiative. Jessica was hesitant but didn't know if that was because this role would lead her career in the wrong direction or if she was simply resistant to change.

First, Jessica completed a TruValues Assessment© to determine what she valued most in her career. She learned that she placed a high value on making a contribution, being a catalyst, and leading people. We looked at which role would best serve these values, and then we broke down what she really did and did not enjoy in a job. Eventually she realized that she obtained much of her job satisfaction from being in a people leader role. This was not part of the new role in the way it was originally presented. Jessica also examined what attracted her to the new opportunity. The main reason she would accept the new role was to avoid feeling guilty, which was rooted in her need to satisfy others' expectations of her.

By starting from her own values and seeing how those applied to the two jobs, Jessica was able to achieve the best of both worlds. She negotiated a hybrid role that involved leading a team while also working on the new initiative with a narrowed scope.

Not every situation can be resolved with such a compromise, but how can you get what you really want without taking the time to determine what that is? Jessica is certain that the coaching experience helped her to determine—and get—what she wanted out of the job and ultimately her career.

As I mentioned last time, actuarial training has prepared you to be a good technician with strong business acumen, critical skills to securing a good job as an actuary. By then applying coaching techniques such as Barb, Ben and Jessica did above, you can enhance your work experience—immediately and in the long term—so that you can enjoy an excellent and highly rewarding career, using your own definition of success as the standard.

ENDNOTE

[1] You can find the issue with Michele's first article, *Coaching for Actuaries—Is It the Right Model for You?* here: *https://www.soa.org/mpd/*.

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