



Self-Directed Coaching:
A Secret Weapon for Cost
Effective Professional
Development

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Abstract. – Coaching provides a clear competitive advantage in today’s workplace for achieving and maintaining high performance. A state-of-the-art skills assessment can be the basis for *self-directed coaching*, which is an effective approach for those without ready access to a professional coach. To this end, a coaching pathway is presented to help professionals assess, evaluate and leverage their current skill set on their own initiative.

People tend to have one of two general outlooks on the world. They believe either life events are due to their own behavior and attributes, or they believe that life events happen because of uncontrollable circumstances like chance or the actions of others. Social scientists refer to these mindsets as an “internal locus of control” versus an “external locus of control,” respectively. Which mindset best describes you? Carefully read these three statements:

“When I need assistance, I find it difficult to get others to help me”

“Bad luck has often prevented me from achieving things”

“What happens in my career is mostly beyond my own control”

Those who strongly agree with these statements tend to have a greater “external locus of control”^{2,3}. In our experience, employees in this category do not respond well to coaching or constructive criticism. However, candid feedback about professional performance can greatly benefit those who have an “internal locus of control” – that is, those who value knowledge as power and thereby strive for greater power over their professional images and careers. You are in the “internal locus of control” group if you strongly agree with statements like these^{2,3}:

“Once I make plans, it is almost certain that I can make them work”

“My major accomplishments are entirely due to my own hard work and abilities”

“I can learn almost anything if I really set my mind to it”

Individuals with a strong internal locus of control routinely seek out opportunities for personal and professional development. Sometimes this means enlisting the services of a professional coach, while other times it means exploring possible “blind-spots” and areas of growth privately in the spirit of self-reflection. This latter approach to professional development is referred to as *self-directed coaching*.

Self-Directed Coaching

When grounded in sound standardized assessment, self-directed coaching is a convenient, private, cost-effective and valid way to invest in your personal and professional development. The type of standardized assessment that is the best “secret weapon” in this context focuses on a person’s *Attitude* and *Skill Set*, not simply one’s personality structure. It is also crucial to use a normative instrument based in advanced test theory

(i.e., Item Response Theory: IRT) so the results are guaranteed to be of the highest reliability and validity¹. Of course, IRT is preferable for reasons beyond psychometric grounds. Advanced test theory methods of constructing assessments yield new and surprising ways to look at test takers' response patterns. In particular, when tests are computerized or Web-based, IRT can be used to find "outliers" among the responses, and such outliers can be exploited for diagnostic purposes. For instance, in addition to knowing that you score "high" on "leadership," is it not also valuable to know that you seem to avoid all forms of conflict or that you lack decisiveness? These are the kinds of questions that can now be answered – and they are exactly the types of insights and information that are central to self-directed coaching. In our experience, professionals actually value such detailed information as much as (and often more than) the typical information provided by most standardized assessments. This is because the diagnostic feedback points to individuals' specific strengths and blind-spots with any eye for future training and development purposes.

Six reasons for self-directed coaching

Self-directed coaching – when grounded in legitimate online assessment – helps people navigate in today's business environment:

A rapidly evolving business environment. The ability to learn and adapt is quickly becoming an essential skill in today's environment of change. Online testing can be conducted when it fits your schedule, and the results are available immediately.

The features of modern organizations. Organizations with broader management roles, lower job security or without clear structures have contributed to the need for self-guided coaching. Newly promoted individuals often have to make large changes in skills, responsibilities and performance. Assessment identifies hidden strengths you can use to build on and "blind-spots" of which you need to be aware in order to maintain peak performance.

Individual responsibility for development. Self-directed coaching encourages professionals to identify development needs, plan development activities and support personal problem-solving. Accordingly, individuals are in control of when and how they learn.

The need for targeted, individualized, just-in-time development. Testing can provide highly customized and specific performance feedback, as opposed to "cookie-cutter" statements that plague most assessments on the market today¹.

The financial costs of the poor performance. Coaching allows people to undertake pre-emptive and proactive interventions to improve their performance. Most coaching happens at the junior and middle management levels, but all employment levels can use it. To be sure, studies have shown that even for low-

level positions a failed hire costs a company double the person's salary. At higher levels, the cost can be six times the salary.

Employee demand for different types of training. Research demonstrates that people are more motivated and learn best when they know that training is relevant to their job. Skills testing and self-directed coaching, with its constructive focus on work issues and improving job performance, fits in well with this scope.

The mechanics of self-directed coaching

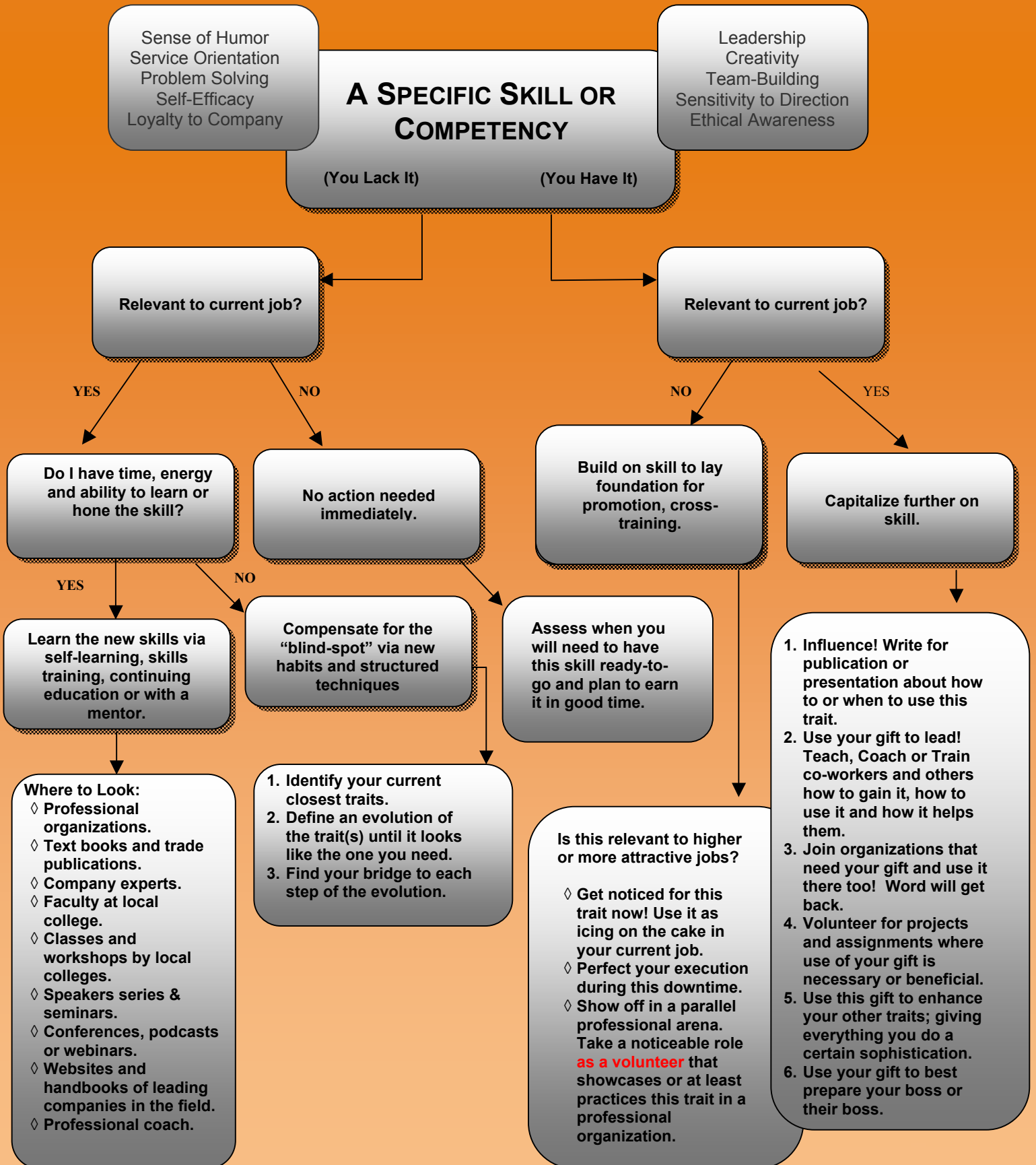
The “Coaching Pathway” presented below is a structured set of steps to facilitate self-discovery and the start of a professional development plan. *Of course, one does not need to be on the fast track to benefit from this process. Candidates preparing or updating their resumes or prepping for job interviews can gain considerable advantages as well.*

The pathway begins with the completion of a legitimate skills assessment in order to take an impartial inventory of your skill set. We recommend assessing competencies that predict job performance in the service industry – Leadership, Creativity, Team-Building, Sensitivity to Diversity, Ethical Awareness, Sense of Humor, Service Orientation, Problem Solving, Self-Efficacy and Loyalty to Company.

Personality assessments can complement – but not replace – this process by providing insight into your interpersonal style. There are several well-constructed personality inventories, and we invite you to contact us for more information about these and they should be used for professional development purposes.

Donald Trump stated, “You must love what you do or you will not try as hard to gain knowledge.” To be in the right job, you must be clear on your passion, skills, competencies, values, cultural fit and personality. You must examine your strengths and identify the sources of intrinsic satisfaction. Learn to assess what is important in your life and what you value most on a given day, and then establish reasonable expectations using our “Coaching Pathway.”

SELF-DIRECTED COACHING PATHWAY



...Following-through

Self-directed coaching does not wholly replace a professional coach. Our “Coaching Pathway” instead lays the foundation for a developmental plan, which professional coaches can assist with implementing to have the greatest impact. When used judiciously, self-directed coaching can offer considerable benefits to both the individual and the employer.

For instance, individuals benefit by:

- Learning to solve their own problems
- Learning to identify and act on development needs or goals
- Building greater confidence
- Having greater self-awareness and gaining new perspectives
- Fostering greater adaptability to change
- Improving work-life balance
- Reducing stress levels by reinforcing a sense of control and mastery

These individual benefits also directly affect a company’s bottom line by improving work quality and productivity, increasing employee commitment and satisfaction (which can lead to improved retention) and supporting other training and development initiatives within the company.

Ideally all companies would invest in training, coaching and professional development for its workforce. However, savvy and forward-thinking professionals who possess that “internal locus of control” do not wait for opportunities to come to them. Rather, they take the initiative. And the process of self-directed coaching and professional coaching offers a competitive edge to driven individuals who want the opportunity to better define and meet their short-term and long-term goals in their careers... and indeed in across other aspects of their lives.

References

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- ³Paulhus, D. L., & Van Selst, M. (1990). The Spheres of Control scale: Ten years of research. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 11, 1029-1036.

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Alan Keith received an M.B.A from the Schulich School of Business, York University and a Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) in Industrial Relations from the I.H. Asper School of Business, University of Manitoba. Alan joined 20|20 Skills™ assessment as Vice President following twenty years of experience in the service and assessment industry. A frequent speaker on talent management and service excellence, he has markedly increased financial results by establishing performance based cultures that are focused on attracting and retaining talent. Alan has also consulted with Fortune 500 companies on talent management issues including assessment. He provides personal coaching to people looking to improve their career path and also offers sales and service training to the service sector. He is currently on the Board of Directors for JVS Toronto, a community organization that offers career, employment, training and psychological services.

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James Houran holds a Ph.D. in Psychology and is President of 20|20 Skills™ assessment. He is an 18-year veteran in research and assessment on peak performance and experiences, with a special focus on online testing. His award-winning work has been profiled by a myriad of media outlets and programs including the Discovery Channel, A&E, BBC, Court TV, CNN, NBC's *Today Show*, *Wilson Quarterly*, *Chicago Tribune*, *USA Today*, *New Scientist*, *Psychology Today*, *Forbes.com* and *Rolling Stone*.

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