Coaching and the Instincts

By Mario Sikora

It is quite easy to see how the Enneagram can be valuable to a coach. When I first began working with business executives nearly 15 years ago, the Enneagram quickly demonstrated its value in accelerating the engagement—I was quickly able to understand the client’s world view, identify potentially problematic attitudes and behaviors, and frame solutions in a language that would appeal to the specific client in front of me rather than rely on a generalized approach.

The ways my own Ennea-type enhanced and hindered my coaching skills also quickly became obvious. As an Ennea-type Eight coach, my clients in the corporate world often resonated with my no-nonsense approach and emphasis on action and results, but I sometimes found myself rushing to the solution and not giving clients the time they needed to meander a bit and discover the solution themselves with a little gentle guidance from me.

When I started training other coaches, I saw how their Ennea-type influenced them and I began to help them develop strategies to take advantage of their Ennea-type’s gifts and overcome its obstacles.

A few years ago I started noticing how important the instincts were when it came to coaching—both for the client and for the coach—and started paying more attention to them in my work. In this article I’d like to briefly introduce ways that a coach can use the knowledge of the instincts to enhance his or her coaching abilities. I will expand on this topic in my presentation at the IEA Conference in San Francisco this summer. Since I am an executive coach, the corporate environment is my focus; however, I believe the basic ideas are relevant to other types of coaching as well.

First, a few words about the basic concepts: Readers of this publication* are probably already familiar with the concept of subtypes—the three variations of each Ennea-type rooted in instinctive drives commonly called “self-preservation,” “social” and “sexual” instincts. So depending on one’s dominant instinct and Ennea-type, a person can be a self-preservation One, a social One, or a sexual One, a self-preservation Two, etc, for a total of 27 variations of combined type and instinct. Don Riso and Russ Hudson, astutely, began treating the instincts as independent factors with the publication of their book The Wisdom of the Enneagram. That is, they didn’t address instincts solely in relationship to Ennea-type; they looked at the “instinctual variants” as worthy of study in and of themselves. Others had done this before, I believe, but Riso and Hudson placed particular emphasis on it that I think is important.

For the sake of this article, I will treat the instincts this way, focusing on behaviors that are rooted in the instinct domain rather than being subtype specific. That is, I will focus on behaviors that tend to be consistent in all self-preservation subtypes, all social subtypes, and all sexual subtypes, no matter what their Ennea-type is.

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I have a few quibbles with the way the instincts are commonly taught. First is the idea that there are three, and only three, instincts. The concept of instincts, in the literature of biology, is a murky subject at best. There are many definitions of what an “instinct” is, and they tend to fall somewhere between an automatic reflex and a much more malleable behaviors. It is generally agreed, however, that instincts are very specific and we humans, like all other mammals, have many specific instincts rather than three broad instincts as commonly described in the Enneagram literature. That said, based on observation it seems clear that our instincts fall roughly into three broad groupings or domains. This is a subtle distinction perhaps, but it is useful for explaining the variation seen within people of the same dominant instinctual bias (my preferred term for these three categories). For example, “nesting and nurturing” and conservation of resources seem to be at the head of what is commonly called the “self-preservation instinct,” but different SPs will focus on different behaviors within this domain. Some may focus on their home (nesting) more than others, some may focus on stockpiling resources more than others, some may focus on their physical well-being more than others, etc. These topics will be important to all SPs, but they will be variably expressed from person to person within the domain.

Which leads to a second quibble: the instincts need to be seen as primarily biological issues, rather than psychological issues. This is not to say that expression of our instincts is not influenced by psychological, cultural, or environmental factors, but the core of the instincts resides in unalterable and inheritable roots. Instincts are reactions to complex stimuli that do not involve thinking. This is important to understand because people will often confabulate and try to use reason to explain instinctive behavior. They may say, for example that they dress flamboyantly (generally an indicator of a “sexual subtype”) for, say, business reason, but are really self-preserving, or they may explain their hoarding (generally an indicator of a self-preservation subtype) in terms of a deprived childhood. While, on occasion, these environmental factors can genuinely contribute to particular instinct-related behavior, in my experience such seeming aberrations are really a sign that the person has misidentified their dominant instinct. Our failure to see the instincts as biological while insisting on environmental or psychological explanations for our instinct-related behavior can render us blind to the prevalence of the behaviors and unable to appreciate their enormous impact on our lives.

Finally, I’m a little troubled by the names of the instincts domains as commonly used. The biggest problem I see is with the term “sexual subtype”: issues of accuracy aside, the word “sexual” is impossible to use in the corporate setting; doing so is asking for a lawsuit. The substitute term “one-to-one” muddies the concept rather than clarifies it. At the heart of this instinct domain is the display of reproductive fitness and an impulse to transmit something of ourselves to others, be it our genes, our ideas, or our creations. People with this instinctual bias will tend to be outgoing and charming, and combine a flattering and seductive quality with a tendency to tell stories about themselves (i.e., to “transmit”). They like intensity in their relationships,
but emphasizing a comfort with one-on-one conversations and engagements often causes self-preservation types (who also have this “one-to-one” focus) to label themselves “one-to-one” and misses the more important elements of the domain.

When I work with clients I refer to the three instinct domains as “preserving,” “navigating,” and “transmitting,” but for the sake of this article I am using the standard terminology. I also, for ease of use, refer to “types” in this article when I refer to people with a particular instinctual bias, such as, “social types.” Please see this as distinct from “Ennea-type.”

These few theoretical quibbles out of the way, let’s move on to the practicalities.

**The Instincts and the Client**

As an executive coach, my charter is clear: help my clients take advantage of their strengths and overcome their weaknesses. It’s more complicated than this simple statement sounds, of course, and I never know what the client’s specific needs will be—it could be career guidance, behavioral modification, assistance with a transition, or simply an unbiased listener—but helping clients leverage strengths and mitigate weaknesses is what I really get paid for.

Understanding the instinct domains is useful because, like Ennea-type, they help us quickly identify common patterns of strengths and weaknesses. Combining the two in a coaching engagement creates a more robust understanding of the terrain of the client’s performance landscape.

We’ll start with the self-preservation types (SPs). Their strengths tend to include good organizational skills, attention to detail, a focus on process and procedure, and they tend to be more cautious and conservative (a strength in many jobs). They typically spot a plan’s problems and pitfalls more clearly than others. On the downside, this same cautiousness can hold them back, and SPs often need coaching around how to become more risk-taking without ignoring their need for security. This can even be true of people with Ennea-types that are typically seen as aggressive and risk taking. For example, SP Threes, Eights, and Sevens often wrestle more than most with choosing their next assignment when risk is involved.

Additionally, SPs tend to ignore what I think of as the “sizzle” of corporate life—the ability to stand out from the crowd, promote oneself and one’s team, and achieve deserved recognition for their accomplishments. Thus, they often need help with career management—promoting themselves in a way that does not feel artificial, making their voice heard in meetings, etc.

Social types (SOCs) generally have a different set of strengths and weaknesses. They are typically good at the social connection and interpersonal dynamics required for life in organizations. They are not necessarily extraverted, but often like to be around people and want to know more about them. This makes them attuned to organizational politics and they generally build good social networks. On the downside, they can become too interested in gossip and the political intrigue of the organization. They can be status or hierarchy conscious and fall into the trap of unnecessarily comparing themselves to others. Further, they typically exhibit poor attention to detail,
and they tend to be uninterested in process and procedures. Even people with Ennea-types typically associated with attention to detail can struggle in this area. For example, Social Ones and Sixes are not nearly as detail-oriented as the SPs and SXs of the same Ennea-type. They often need coaching around prioritization, process, and adherence to metrics.

Socials can also be ambivalent about self-promotion. They don’t neglect it in the way that many SPs do, but they are conflicted. They may feel that they do it awkwardly, so can fall into a pattern of mostly avoiding it but sometimes overcompensating and overdoing it. They often need guidance in understanding that it is okay (in fact, it is necessary) to promote themselves and go with their impulse to be seen. They can learn to consciously do this in effective and appropriate ways rather than bouncing back and forth between over-doing it and under-doing it.

Sexual types (SXs) are generally good at the sizzle that SPs are not good at. They are often charismatic and extroverted. They can be inspiring and excite people around a common cause. They are often good sales people (formally or informally) and can influence others at the individual or group level. They can focus their attention on a person in short but intense bursts, finding just the right thing to say and making the person feel like he or she is the only person in the room. On the downside, they can dominate conversations and relationships. After the initial charm and flattery, SXs can turn the focus on themselves and keep it there. Further, they tend not to be attuned to the subtle interpersonal dynamics that the Socials are so good at, and they often are not aware of how they are truly perceived by others. They are not typically good listeners, even though they typically disagree with that assessment. They often need coaching on making space for others, on not dominating interactions with others, and on “receiving” messages as well as they “transmit” them.

Sexuals may often demonstrate a shadow scarcity mentality, believing that they never have enough of the things that are important to them. They may want more money, more prestige, more attention. This desire for more can start to seem like self-centeredness to others in the organization, and Sexuals often need coaching on how to express their desires without coming across as having an undue sense of entitlement.

The Instincts and the Coach

Coaches should see themselves as continuous learners, always seeking to improve their skills while increasing their ability to model the behaviors and attitudes they expect from their clients. Thus, it is important to look at yourself as your own client and work on the instinct-related issues described above as they relate to you. You should make sure that you are taking full advantage of your strengths and working to reduce your shortcomings.

Below are a few things to watch for during your coaching. Again, this is only a brief introduction to a much broader topic.

Coaches for whom the self-preservation instinct domain is dominant are generally good at coaching clients in the very skills they tend to be good at: the fundamentals of working in organizations. These include organizational and time-management skills, setting up processes and
procedures, and prioritization skills. They are typically good at spotting potential problems and mapping paths to their resolution.

SP coaches should ensure that they are taking care of their own fundamental security needs and using them to build a solid business foundation for their coaching practice -- putting marketing and administrative structures in place that will ensure a comfortable livelihood. At the same time, they need to ensure they do not see their client merely as a source of revenue. One of the big differences between coaching and therapy is that a coaching engagement tends to have a much shorter lifespan. The need for security can cause SP coaches to prolong the engagement longer than necessary because they don’t want to let go of a source of revenue. Ironically, this need to hold on to existing clients actually hinders the SP coach’s security because it keeps them from searching for new clients and building their practice. When the client finally realizes that the coaching is showing diminishing returns and ends the engagement, the coach could be left with no work because his or her pipeline of clients has not been steadily filled.

Coaches for whom the social instinct domain is dominant are generally good at coaching clients to become more effective in the networking and interpersonal skills so critical to corporate life. They often understand corporate politics very well and can help their clients become better navigators of those sometimes treacherous waters. They are very good at seeing a wide variety of viewpoints and helping clients see their behaviors or attitudes from a different perspective, a prerequisite for creating change.

SOC coaches should ensure that they are satisfying their social needs outside of the coaching arena. It is tempting to become friends with clients and, even though a coaching engagement is different from therapy, good ethical practice demands that the coach keep a professional distance from the client. The SOC coach must also ensure that they do not turn the coaching session into a conversation without resolution. Every coaching session should have an identifiable beginning, middle, and end. Each session should conclude with the creation of an action plan and those action plans should be followed-up on during the next meeting.

Since Socials are not generally strong at administrative and organizational skills, they must really focus on this part of their practice. Good record keeping, maintaining organized notes filed in retrievable formats, etc., are important fundamental skills to develop.

Finally, coaches with a dominant sexual instinct domain tend to be good at helping clients build confidence in their performance and presentation. They are naturally good at making the client feel heard and valued, especially early in the engagement. They understand the value of and techniques for making themselves seen and heard in an organization, and are often good at helping clients stand out from the crowd.

SX coaches need to make sure that their need to be seen and heard does not intrude into the coaching engagement. One of the qualities of a good coach is the ability to be transparent and disappear, to keep the focus on the client and only intrude when necessary. The best coaches take a Socratic approach, probing and questioning and challenging
assumptions, letting the client come to the right conclusions on his or her own. Of course, the coach must guide when necessary so there is progress and momentum, and they should offer insights gleaned from their experience, but in general it is best to keep the focus on the client. SX coaches need to be careful that they are not pushing a philosophical, spiritual, or political agenda onto their clients.

Since SXs can have blind spots around organizational dynamics, they need to make sure that they are attuned to their client’s organizational politics and culture. They need to see the individual as part of a broader system, and understand the affect of that system on the individual’s life.

There is much more to say on this topic, of course, but I hope this article spurs some thought and reflection. Combining the instincts and the Ennea-types creates a far more robust coaching framework than focusing on Ennea-types alone.

Spending some time focused on the instincts as an independent factor will provide many insights into how you might be able to improve your coaching practice, both in seeing and overcoming your own blind spots and in understanding your clients at a much deeper level.

Footnotes:

1 See, for example, Mark S. Blumberg’s “Basic Instinct: The Genesis of Behavior.”

2 I discuss this further in the article, “The Notes and the Melody, Part 3” which can be found at http://www.awarenesstoaction.com/downloads/notes_melody_3.pdf.

3 The choice of these terms is described in the article “The Instincts: Taking a Broader View” on my website at http://www.awarenesstoaction.com/downloads/the_instincts.pdf.

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