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Probing the executive mind

Coach will ask 'What's the story?'

When teen pop artist Britney Spears sings her new hit, "Oops, I Did It Again," she is articulating what executive coach Michael O'Brien tells executives: Bad habits need to be broken.

Lack of thought management and uncontrolled emotions can spiral through a company, leading to employee mistakes, higher turnover, even reduced sales.

A Wyoming resident and co-author of *Profit From Experience: A guide to knowing yourself and influencing others* (\$10; O'Brien Group), Dr. O'Brien has had several workplace incarnations, including 10 years as a grocer/retailer and years as a teacher, manager and university professor. He has a master's in education and a Ph.D. in corporate training and human resources development from the University of Cincinnati. He was interviewed by Enquirer reporter John Eckberg:

Question: You've said that for the average executive, half of what he is doing is great stuff, 30 percent of his habits are not making any difference and 20 percent of his habits are holding people back. It seems that something you might be able to nibble at is the 30 percent that isn't making any difference.

Answer: Actually, what we usually start with are the habits that are holding people back, causing trouble. Our coaching is focused on helping people succeed within their business organizations, with the context of the business's goals.

There are always revenue goals, but most sophisticated business people realize that you have to have a whole lot of other goals to get you to the revenue.

It's a little risky to say here are the five things that every business person can use. We spend the bulk of our time with executives in large corporations so the store manager in Dent probably has a little bit of a different helping on his plate than the guy who runs Cincinnati Bell or Convergys.

We start by saying what are the business issues, what are the things getting in the way of being successful, and then we look at what the executive is doing to contribute to that, his psychology, his way of thinking.

We use the metaphor of stories: What is the story I'm telling myself out of which this behavior comes that is not producing the results I want? What are you telling yourself, what are you assuming to be true?

We might observe a meeting, and we'll see where the executive is not communicating well with the people. He is missing their points. They are missing his points. They are on different planes.

He is not reading the emotions in the room. One of the things we'll ask ourselves as coaches is: What must this individual be thinking so that that behavior makes sense to him? He is doing this behavior for some reason

Q: You look, then, for the behavior behind a disconnect – the behavior behind – why an executive missed something, missed a cue?

A: We look even behind that to the thinking behind a behavior or, said differently, What's the story? – which has cognitive thoughts in it as well as emotions like fear and passion.

There's something he has assumed to be true – call that the story – out of which this behavior, which we observe is not working to produce the results he wants.

Part of what we do as coaches is we help people figure out what is that source? It's intuitive. It's unconscious. You don't even know it. When we start asking questions, we usually find out there is quite a complex story organized in there and when someone stands inside that story, the behavior makes a lot of sense.

What the executive is not seeing is the effect his behavior is having on his people in the room, on the group, on the psychology, on what they're going to do next.

Q: You like to have clients journalize. Can you talk about how that helps identify their story? How that works?

A: We will pick an upset that occurred to them, something that just didn't work, and we'll say go back and write out the story. What were you assuming to be true about those in the meeting room? About the purpose of the meeting? What were you assuming to be true about your role in all that?

If there is a big upset, we have them reflect on what the big upset reminds them of – in some cases, we have them go back and think about it as a child.

What upsets you the most are things you learned to be upset about as a kid.

Q: The journal then should examine assumptions about what's true, assumptions about purpose of exchanges and assumptions of roles individuals have in the exchange. At that point, an individual can become reflective about their background.

A: When you do enough journaling, or sometimes in dialogue, what you begin to realize is that the executive has some responsibility in how

O'Brien's favorites on the Web

Web bookmarks offer insight into a surfer's world. Here are some of Mr. O'Brien's favorites:

■ mgeneral.com — "Quick source for reviews, interviews and management e-books."

■ travelocity.com — "Interesting meeting and vacation venues."

■ hbr.org/forum — "Harvard Business Review discussions – fresh perspectives."

Favorite Books

■ *Working With Emotional Intelligence*, by Daniel Goleman (\$29.95; Bantam Books, "Offers great insights into a domain many neglect.")

■ *How The Irish Saved Civilization*, by Thomas Cahill, (Doubleday; \$24.95), I love history's transition periods; this shows how western civilization survived the Dark Ages."



M. O'Brien

things turned out.

Usually when things don't go well, what's the first thing people do?

Q: I blame somebody else.

A: Exactly! You blame the other person or persons... Or people will rationalize, make up a story about how it wasn't really important or they didn't really care.

The rationalization in the moment may make some sense, but it's coming out of an old fear or an unwillingness to address a difficult situation. All are perfectly normal human behaviors. Fears and reactions to fears are perfectly normal.

We try to help people get to a "discipline of personal mastery" and the first piece of that is self-awareness: what are my thoughts, mental models and stories out of which comes my behavior, out of which comes some difference in the results occurring in the workplace.

For instance, the executive could realize that the way he set the meeting up affected how his manager behaved, which affected the results that the individual is now being blamed for.

One of the tenets of the discipline of personal mastery is looking to see where an individual can be more accountable.

A chief executive, a president, a vice president has to realize that their behavior has this huge symbolic effect on everybody else in the organization. A little tiny thing – how you handle your upset in a meeting – will spread through the psychology of an organization like wildfire.

 **OBrienGroup**
Executive Coaching and Leadership Development

1276 Sweetwater Drive
Cincinnati, Ohio 45215
513.821.9580 Fax 513.821.9581
www.obriengroup.us