In the literature of the coaching profession, the voice of the client is rarely heard. This case study examines the coaching process from the perspective of both the coach and the participant, providing unique insights into the art of coaching. Beginning with background descriptions of the coach and the participant, the authors move into a discussion of the first coaching engagement, which began in 2000. Two years later, after Jennifer had been promoted into a larger and more complex assignment, the authors began working together again. The authors discuss highlights of the coaching experience from each of their perspectives and compare what was similar and different across the 2 coaching engagements.

As a coach and the first author of this article, I have been interested in ensuring that the voice of the client is heard. I invited Jennifer to participate with me on this particular article for several reasons. First, we worked together on two separate occasions, which provides the opportunity to demonstrate her progress and illustrate how we collaborated in different ways on different topics at different points in time. Second, Jennifer is perceptive and articulate, so her comments about the coaching process are interesting and insightful. She has a lively, dynamic personality and an entertaining style, evidenced in this comment from our first conversation: "I’m so good at what I do that I’ve been pigeonholed. I’m like Meg Ryan—she’s always cast to play the Meg Ryan part. I need to tell them, I’m no longer Meg Ryan. Today, I’m the wicked witch of the west.”

The Coach: David B. Peterson

I began working at Personnel Decisions International (PDI) in 1985, the same year I started graduate work in psychology at the University of Minnesota. I quickly gravitated to the coaching business, and in 1990 was promoted to lead PDI’s worldwide coaching practice. In synergy between work and school, I spent 5 years gathering outcome and follow-up data on 370 coaching participants for my dissertation (Peterson, 1993; see also Peterson & Kraiger, 2004) and then received my PhD in counseling and industrial/organizational psychology in 1993.

My coaching practice began with local companies in Minneapolis, such as 3M, Honeywell, and General Mills. Today, I work in a diverse range of industries and organizations (such as Shell, Deloitte & Touche, Daimler Chrysler, and the Mayo Clinic) but gravitate toward technology companies, such as Hewlett-Packard and Medtronic. Most of my coaching is with general managers and senior executives, although I work with midlevel managers in two or three companies where I have a long-standing relationship. The topics that come up most frequently include strategic thinking, executive leadership, leading change, and time management (everyone seems besieged by the challenge to get more done in less time with fewer re-

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sources). Over the years, I’ve worked with people on virtually every aspect of leadership, interpersonal and communications skills (e.g., Peterson, 2003), decision making, and other managerial skills. Nonetheless, my true expertise is in the process of learning and development—helping people actually implement the changes that make them more effective in the real world—which is discussed in more detail below (see also Hicks & Peterson, 1997; Peterson & Hicks, 1995, 1996).

My coaching is guided by two overarching principles:

1. Be the kind of coach that I would like to work with. This principle, which I adopted in 1990, led me to many insights. I shifted my coaching away from activities such as giving feedback and dealing with resistance and toward mutual exploration and helping each person clarify and achieve what is most important to him or her. I began each coaching conversation by asking, “What would you most like to get out of this?” (Which is followed by, “What does your organization expect and require of you?”) Instead of following the same routine process with everyone, I began partnering with people to design the coaching process from start to finish. For example, instead of subjecting them to a so-called objective assessment, we would discuss what data would be most helpful and agree on a process that would be fair and credible for all stakeholders. I stopped referring to people as “coachees,” which makes them sound like passive recipients, and started talking about them as the people I work with in coaching. All these changes in my style, and many more, started with a few simple questions: “How would I like to be treated if I were in coach-

2. Aim to be a great coach; do not settle for being a good coach. After working with hundreds of coaches from virtually every background of training and experience, I’ve concluded that it is relatively easy to be a good coach. With a core set of tools, some basic interpersonal skills, and a desire to be helpful, you can provide genuine benefit to others. At the same time, I’ve seen good coaches become complacent by concluding that since what they are doing works, they will stick with it. Good, however, is the enemy of great, and I’ve tried to live by the principle of striving to become a great coach (see Peterson, 2002; Peterson & Hicks, 1999; Peterson & Sutherland, 2003). I operationalize this by continually asking myself, “What is the most positive and powerful thing I can do right now?” Of course, the answer to that question must take into account the person’s goals, values, capabilities, personality, and specific learning objectives as well as the expectations from their organization. So I keep searching for ways to achieve better results in less time.

The Participant: Jennifer Millier

I earned my degree in electrical engineering and joined Hewlett-Packard (HP) in 1983. Most of my early career was in research and development (R&D) for the personal computer (PC) business, although I worked several years in technical marketing and spent 3 years as a sales person for Europe. After another stint in R&D, I moved back into marketing as the manager of the value delivery chain, which involved extensive cross-functional and cross-divisional work. Finally, I moved into a new business for HP, working on direct-to-customer sales for HP products. Historically,
we have always sold through indirect channels, so this new area was a challenge to the status quo.

I have been fortunate to work for managers who have always been willing to let me run with the job and exercise my judgment and who have given me the freedom to lead large programs. However, I found that I was repeatedly handed projects and programs that met my need to work on something important to the business while only drawing on the same set of skills and problem-solving approaches that I had already developed. I was not being stretched. I no longer felt that I was sharpening the tools that would take me to the next level of growth and opportunity.

By early 2000, I had led a series of successful programs and people discovered that I was quite good at solving gnarly problems that had stymied others. After progressing up the management chain into second-level management, I was facing different business challenges on each project while still being viewed the same old way. I was so good at my job that my manager’s major suggestion for my development plan was simply to clone myself so I could do more of the same. But I craved new challenges so I could stretch and grow beyond what I had always done. Unfortunately, I was told I was too critical to the program I was working on to move on, even for a promotion.

That summer, I decided to leave HP and accepted a job with another company. When senior management found out I had resigned, they began an intense campaign to keep me. They had underestimated how serious I was about needing a new opportunity, just as I had underestimated how much they valued me. After a series of conversations with my boss and his boss, I found myself in Duane Zitzner’s office, the group general manager three levels up from me. Surprisingly, Duane offered me a job working directly for him. Here I was asking for development and challenge, and he was willing to create a special job just to keep me.\(^1\) Although everyone thought I was a fool for not taking it, I did not want special treatment—I wanted to work in an organization that would take my development seriously. I was not looking for the money or the stock options but the challenge and the learning.

As part of our discussion about my development, I was offered a 360 feedback survey and a coach. I knew that in order to find new challenges and advance my career I needed to work on financial skills, how to manage managers, political savvy, and leadership in the broader business context. But I was curious to see what the 360 would tell me.

### Coaching Begins, 2000–2001

David: On Friday, August 18, 2000, Jennifer and I walked into a small conference room at HP’s site in Cupertino, California. Jennifer was anxious to talk about her 360 results. After she told me about her background and her goals for coaching, we went over the survey. Jennifer scored above average on virtually every dimension. Her highest ratings were on results orientation, energy and enthusiasm, motivation and commitment, teamwork, relationships, networking, communications, and business acumen. Her lowest ratings—which were still very strong—were on systems and processes, and there was a clear message that people would welcome more delegation and coaching from her.

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\(^1\)I have always attributed much of my success to good fortune in having had a string of great managers and supporters. Even with talent and hard work, having the advantage of mentors and advocates such as Duane Zitzner, Scott Stallard, and Xuan Bui would have measurable impact on anyone’s career.
Jennifer: After we went over the feedback, David asked me what I wanted to work on. I immediately focused on the lowest ratings from my 360 survey. At one point, I grabbed the 360 report, opened up to the weakness page, and started listing each weakness as a development need. David reached over, shut the book, and again asked what I wanted to work on. I flipped back to the page of my weaknesses. David shook his head, shut the book and then moved it away from my reach. He asked me again, and I thought it was some kind of test or that he was trying to prove some point. As we talked, I realized that I automatically focused on my weaknesses. That is how I'd always gotten better in the past. What I began to realize now was that I needed a different approach. We started to talk about where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do next. I was already good at what I was doing—the 360 told me that if I did not already know it. Getting better at those things would just keep me pigeonholed. The way I was doing things had always served me well, but I needed to shift my focus to the future. From that moment on, for the rest of our coaching, David’s message to me has always been, “You are good, but you could be really good.” I’m a stubborn case, but that was the most helpful thing he ever did—help me realize that I needed to start learning a new set of tools and build a bigger tool box.

David: One of the most helpful tools in coaching is the Development Pipeline (Hicks & Peterson, 1999; Peterson, 2002). As a diagnostic of the five necessary conditions for development, it helped me identify the greatest leverage for Jennifer’s learning. Here’s what I saw, presented in the order in which they became clear to me (see Figure 1):

- **Motivation:** Defined as people’s willingness to invest the time and energy it takes to develop themselves: Incredible motivation and commitment to learning; eager for challenge; she was willing to spend her time and energy on development.

- **Capabilities:** Defined as the extent to which people have the skills and knowledge they need: Bright, talented, and with the raw capabilities to be successful at almost ev-

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**Figure 1.** Jennifer’s development pipeline. Motivation and accountability are strong. Insight is most constrained.
 Everything she put her mind to, though she would need to develop additional new skills in several areas.

Real-world practice: The extent to which people have opportunities to try their new skills at work: She was stuck in a rut, doing the same old things. Even though she was eager for new challenges, it was not apparent that she had opportunities at hand to stretch herself and try new things, so this was clearly a constraint.

Accountability: The internal and external mechanisms that drive people to internalize their new capabilities so they actually improve performance and results: Jennifer was already holding herself accountable for high levels of learning and performance.

Insight: The extent to which people are aware of what they need to develop to achieve greater personal and organizational success: In many ways, Jennifer was very insightful. In others, she was surprisingly unaware. It took me a while to realize that this was actually the main constraint to her successful development. She would throw herself at problems and find a solution, but she rarely stopped to reflect about what she could do differently. Although I never used this language with Jennifer, I started using a technique I call clear goals, conscious choice (Peterson & Sutherland, 2003). In each of our four meetings, we spent some time working on clear goals: getting a clear sense of what matters to her, what motivates her, what values she wants to live by and lead by. And then we worked on how she would use those goals and values to make conscious choices about what she did and where she spent her time. As a starting point, and to help her gain insight for her development, I encouraged Jennifer to reflect every single day on two things—what she wanted to accomplish that day and what was the best way for her to do that.

Jennifer: Just asking myself those questions forced me to stop and think. I was always running so fast that I did not connect the dots. I needed to look at the broader system—if I stood back, what picture did the dots paint? Was that the picture I wanted it to be? Where was the Monet rather than just the individual dots? In fact, I began to realize that I was the painter and I could start painting the picture I wanted.

In the past I had graded myself on how fast I moved toward the end goal on a project. I got all kinds of validation from my managers that I was doing important things for the business. After I started reflecting on what was important, it felt like I could make greater progress on even bigger things. I had to develop some discipline to think strategically about what I wanted to do and not just paint single dots on the canvas. I had to ignore the distractions to get to the bigger picture. David was challenging me to go further, to choose my priorities and focus on them. Now I saw that I could set a higher standard and go in to learn as well as go in to do a good job.
It sounds so simple, but it had a profound impact at the time. With my priorities clear, I began to spend my days gathering gold instead of pyrite. I felt a greater sense of accomplishment, because I ended each day with a small sack of gold instead of an impressively heavy bag of rocks. I was able to focus on what had the greatest value, ignoring the distractions and walking the 10 miles to the riverbed where the gold nuggets were sitting.

**David:** At the time, Jennifer was tackling whatever problems were put in front of her. Her managers knew that she was so talented and motivated that they could point her at something and she would take care of it. But for Jennifer to get where she wanted to go, she had to start choosing where she spent her time. Knowing that she liked to keep score of her progress by checking things off her lengthy to-do list, we started talking about using a point system for how valuable something was. Spending the entire day just to complete half of a critical project may not have allowed her to cross one thing off her list for the day, and she might have felt discouraged. But now, she could count that as 25 points on her scale of how important the project was and feel far more productive than she would if she had just crossed off 10 tasks that were worth only 1 or 2 points each.

**Jennifer:** In each meeting, David always asks me what I learned. I distinctly remember two things from this meeting that have stayed with me ever since:

1. I need to be more reflective and develop the voice that is constantly asking, what’s the next move I need to make? I have to keep the goal in sight for everything I do—even my own development.

2. This is a different ballgame, and I need to learn to play the new game. I was a pro at program management but I needed a new set of skills for the new game I wanted to play, which is strategic, not tactical.

**David:** We spent the last half hour talking about what Jennifer learned and what specific actions she would take. Building on the key theme from the day, four of her six action steps related to insight and reflection:

1. Every day, ask “What is the most important thing I need to accomplish today, and what is the best way to do that?”

2. Identify the hot buttons and issues that distract me from staying focused on the most important. Reflect at the end of the day on what I accomplished and what got in my way.

3. Before every important meeting, identify the most important thing for me to do in this meeting:
   - Assume that getting the job done will take care of itself and figure out what more strategic agenda I need to be tackling.
   - Work on the internal voice that reminds me to...
pay attention to the task at hand and the strategic task.

4. After every important meeting, ask myself how well I did.

My notes from the session show that we also discussed political savvy and several other topics in the 4 hr that we spent together, but these are clearly the highlights. As a coach, one of my most critical tasks is to find leverage: What is the most positive and powerful thing that I can do to help Jennifer achieve her objectives? Spending more time on the 360 survey and digesting other people’s comments clearly had little value for Jennifer in the grand scheme of things. Instead, we focused on the one area of the development pipeline that was most constrained: Jennifer’s insight into what matters most to her—her own goals and values. Until she was clear on what exactly she was trying to accomplish, she was going to keep spinning her wheels.

Our Second Coaching Conversation

David: We met for another 4-hr session about 6 weeks later, on October 3rd. I asked Jennifer how things were going, and she launched into a whirlwind of updates on all the changes at work and her progress on her assignments.

Jennifer (Comments taken from David’s notes):

Things are changing so fast at work that I feel like I cannot make progress on anything. But I’m making progress on the things we talked about, and it is fun. You asked me to reflect, to be conscious in the moment, but my brain is going all over. I’m thinking about what to do next. I have a friend who wears a rubber band on her wrist to help her quit smoking. I flicked myself every time I caught myself drifting. I flicked myself a lot. But I found I’m much better at reflecting afterward, rather than planning beforehand. I do not think about the purpose ahead of time.

We had a futurist come talk to our group. He was saying the same thing—you have to get out of the mode of looking in your rearview mirror to define your future. You have to stop operating out of habit. You have to figure out first where you want to go.

I remembered something you said last time, that I was working so hard on performing that I did not have time for learning and improving. As long as I keep getting As on all the same old things, I will not have time to take new classes. I need to get some Bs and Cs. It is like Tiger Woods. He had to slow down, give up some short-term wins to work on his swing. He spent a whole year working on it and

2It is important to point out that David takes detailed, often verbatim notes on his computer during coaching sessions, so these comments are direct quotes captured at the time.
gave up some good tournament winnings for the sake of winning more later. And he came back stronger than ever. But he had to slow down to move ahead. That is what I need to do.

David: Once Jennifer saw how important this was to her, we shifted our focus, in terms of the development pipeline, from insight to capabilities and real-world practice. We began working on specific skills Jennifer could use to stay focused, to clarify her goals ahead of time, to negotiate expectations with herself as well as the people she worked with, and to let herself be satisfied with earning a B instead of an A. As she got better at those skills, she would be able to focus more effectively on the other skills that she wanted to work on. For example, using the clear goals, conscious choice technique, Jennifer and I would pick specific instances of situations that would distract her from her priorities. One of the hot buttons she had identified was letting herself get distracted by people asking for her time. In her complex, fast-paced world, someone was always asking for something. And because she would quickly volunteer to help, she was continuously reinforcing other people for interrupting her. Here’s what the conversation looked like (reconstructed from detailed notes):

Clear Goals

David: So when someone interrupts you to ask for a few minutes of your time, what do you want to do? What are your goals?

Jennifer: See if it is important or not. Help them if I can.

David: What else do you care about?

Jennifer: Well, I want to manage my time. Not get drawn into something that will distract me from my priorities.

David: What else?

Jennifer: Make sure they feel OK about the conversation. I do not want people to think I’m treating them poorly.

David: What else?

Jennifer: I think that is about it.

David: What’s most important?

Jennifer: I need to work on saying no. Actually, I need to work on giving them the appropriate amount of time, given my priorities.

Conscious Choice

David: OK, so next time someone interrupts you to ask for a few minutes of your time, what are your options?

Jennifer: Just say, come on over. Like I always tell them now. [David writes her responses on a flipchart.]

David: What else could you do?

Jennifer: Ask what they want to talk about... Ask them how important it is... Tell them I’m booked; I just do not have any time available. Of course, if it is Scott I’ll say yes. But other-
wise, I could just say no... Ask them if it can wait until tomorrow. And hope that it goes away.

David: What else could you say?

Jennifer: Ask if they could give me a quick email on it so I can look at it later... Ask them if there’s someone else that could help them with that... Ask them what they need and then together figure out if someone else could help them... [Long pause] That is all I can think of.

David: OK, let us work with that list for now. Given your goals, which of these responses comes closest to giving you what you want?

Jennifer: Probably some combination. If it is Scott, I’ll say yes. If I’m totally swamped, I could ask them to send me a short e-mail. And if I have a minute, I could ask them what they need so we can find a solution together.

David: How well would that work for you?

Jennifer: The first two are easy. But on the last one I think I’d get all wrapped up in it as soon as they started talking.

David: So what can you do to help them but not get caught up in helping them?

Jennifer: The practice with David was almost always helpful in showing me exactly how I could hold an effective conversation—how I could protect my time and still be responsive. What I remember most vividly from this meeting was that just because I was the manager and strategic owner of a topic did not require me to always be there on demand. If I set the agenda for people, I also need to trust they will do a good job. I do not need to be involved at every single step.

David: Even though we were working explicitly on building her capabilities (using the development pipeline again), she was also continuing to gain better insight. With visible progress in both of these areas, we turned our attention to the next con-
How would she remember to actually use what she had learned when she faced the real situation? A coach can help people prepare for real-world practice in at least two ways (part of an overall process I call *fanatical transfer*; Peterson & Sutherland, 2003). The first is by practicing specific situations in as realistic a way as possible (Druckman & Bjork, 1991, Chapter 3). We had done this by having me play the part of a real person discussing real topics as well as by keeping the pressure on Jennifer. Every time she got a little better at what she was doing, I’d throw in a new curve. I’d get irritated that she was not helping me, add a new topic out of the blue, interrupt her, or go off on tangents myself. In other words, I made our practice conversations just as messy, unpredictable, and complex as the real-world situations that she would face. In the real world, she would not have the luxury of a coach reminding her to stop and use her skills.

The second way a coach can help transfer skills to the real world is through bulletproof action steps (Peterson & Sutherland, 2003). Using the same example, here’s what this might have looked like with Jennifer.

*David:* How often does this happen?

*Jennifer:* Maybe 5–10 times a day.

*David:* So every single time someone asks, this is how you’ll respond?

*Jennifer:* Yes.

*David:* So when I ask you in 4 or 5 weeks how you did on this, you’ll tell me that every single time someone asked for your help, you did this?

*Jennifer:* Well, probably not every time.

*David:* OK, so tell me exactly what you want to commit to. It does not matter to me if it is one time a day or every time, but I want you to be perfectly clear on what you are aiming for.

*Jennifer:* There are two or three people where this is a real issue. So every time one of them asks me for help I’ll do this.

*David:* Two people or three people?

*Jennifer:* Two.

*David:* So how will you remember to do this every time they ask?

*Jennifer:* I just will.

*David:* You have already told me that you often get so wrapped up in things that you forget to plan ahead. Why will this be different?

*Jennifer:* You are right. I’ll probably forget.

*David:* I’m not saying you will or will not. I’m just trying to get you to be clear and help you anticipate obstacles. So what will help you remember to do this every time?

*Jennifer:* I need to write it down. I’ll put it on the top of my to-do list so
I think about it every day.

[The conversation continues in a similar vein. . .]

**David:** So you, the reader, should be getting a sense that this is a rigorous and perhaps even tedious process. I continue to ask questions such as the following to make sure that we’ve thought through all the ways her intention might get derailed (see the discussion of fanatical transfer in Peterson & Sutherland, 2003).

- What else do you need to do to make sure you remember this every time?
- What else will get in the way of you doing this? What might prevent you from doing what you want?
- Once you have done it, how will you reflect on your actions, learn from them, and improve what you do the next time?
- How will you get feedback from these two people to see how it is working?
- What else do you need from me, yourself, or anyone else, to make sure you are successful at this?
- Now that we’ve worked through this, is this still a realistic commitment?
- Will you really do it?

**Jennifer:** Sometimes this process was annoying, but after the first couple of times I could really see the value. There were so many things that could lead me away from my purpose. David helped me anticipate them and have a plan. It is not about the detail of each specific obstacle; it is about making sure that I stick to my higher purpose.

**David:** In addition to knowing what is important to Jennifer, clear goals and conscious choices requires that she prioritize things so she can choose where to spend the majority of her time. We began to work on a priority grid, starting with three basic categories.

A: Your job depends on it.
B: Someone will be irritated, annoyed, or upset with you if you do not do it.
C: Everything else.

Because you simply have to do the A priorities and you should just throw away the C priorities, the B priorities are the only place where you really have a choice about what you do. Jennifer, like many people, found that it was often she, herself, or her family that was losing out. She was so responsive to others that she did not prioritize her own goals high enough on the list. So she was putting off some of her own less urgent, long-term priorities to respond to other people’s short-term priorities. Together, we worked out a priority grid that was grounded in what mattered to Jennifer and what mattered to the business.

Figure 2 does not represent Jennifer’s actual grid but a sample similar to one I showed her. Key people are listed in columns from left to right in relative order of importance, and then their priorities are listed in each row in relative order of importance. Reality is never this cut-and-dried or simple, and the grid is most useful as a thinking and clarification tool rather than as an actual decision-making tool. Each individual has to determine where people and projects fall. Some will place themselves, family, or senior management higher or
lower on the grid. There is no right or wrong here, as long as the ranking reflects the individual’s values as realistically as possible. The rows need to reflect the projects and business objectives and tasks that potentially take up one’s time.

Once the priorities are laid out in order, it is relatively easy to assign an A, B, or C rating. Obviously, the A priorities will cluster in the top left of the grid, and the C priorities will cluster in the bottom right. It is only in the B priorities where there is real leverage for time management, usually starting with the ones along the diagonal boundary between the Cs and Bs. In this example, the B items marked with an asterisk are where the person might choose to free up his or her time. Essentially, this involves moving the B* items into the C category. This comes at a price, because the inevitable result is that these people will be annoyed when their requests or expectations are no longer met. So that is where negotiating skills, political savvy, risk taking, and a willingness to pay the price—trading some short-term pain for important long-term gains—come in. As Jennifer pointed out, Tiger Woods had to make short-term sacrifices to move forward. If you do not proactively choose whom to annoy, you end up annoying yourself or someone else when critical things slip through the cracks. This is a tool to be more proactive in managing your priorities and making sure that you focus on the most important areas.

Jennifer: The goal, of course, is not to annoy people, but to have a clear focus on where they fit in your priorities and the overall strategy. At the time, this discussion pointed out some low-hanging fruit, where I was taking on relatively low-priority tasks for people on the right-hand side of the grid just because they asked.

Our Third Coaching Conversation

David: In our first two sessions together, Jennifer and I spent only about 20% of our time working on the topics that she originally said she wanted to work on. Most of our work had actually been on dealing with the things that kept her from learning at the level she needed to, including understanding the rules of the new game she wanted to play and setting the stage for building her new tool kit. We had planned to focus our third session more explicitly on building those new skills. However, when Jennifer showed up to that meeting in mid-January, 2001, she had other plans.

Jennifer had recently been offered a new job, which would have involved a significant promotion and given her the opportunity to explore a totally new part of the business. She was tempted. We spent most of this meeting talking about this specific job in the context of her long-term plans. We clarified Jennifer’s long-term career goals and used the conversation to deepen our understanding of what really mattered to her, a topic we had examined in each of our previous meetings. Jennifer concluded that, although the new job would meet two of her critical short-term priorities (advancement, opportunity to learn), it did not move her forward on her long-term priorities. As she said at the conclusion of our meeting, “I’m too easily seduced by the temptation in front of me. I often choose
the challenge that is sitting in front of me—to prove I can do it or because it looks like fun—rather than choosing the one that meets the most important criteria for me.” In many ways, this discussion consolidated the issues we had been working on so far.

We also spent time planning how Jennifer could find, and even create, the opportunities that would meet more of her criteria. We discussed networking, influence, and organizational savvy as skills that she could use to be more strategic in man-

Figure 2. A sample priority grid for illustrative purposes. (Note that this does not reflect Jennifer’s actual priorities.) The columns represent key people, ranked in relative order of priority (it could also include family, customers, shareholders, and so forth). The rows represent key priorities for each person or group; a more detailed analysis would rank each person’s or group’s own priorities from top to bottom.
aging her career. We also practiced conversations that she could potentially have with key leaders who might have positions she would be interested in. We ended with a specific action plan for whom she would go talk to and what she wanted to accomplish in each conversation.

It is often in sessions like this, where we set aside the standard agenda to work on a live issue, that the greatest learning occurs. That is one reason why I’m always looking for immediate challenges that the person is going to face where they can apply what we are working on. It increases both motivation (people are more willing to try new things when they know their old approaches are not sufficient) and real-world practice (it gets people using the skills relatively quickly, so there is less chance of the new skill or approach fading away).

Jennifer: David gives a good overview of this meeting, but he left out the most important moment. I was talking a mile a minute about this job offer and all the other things going on around me at work. I have so much energy that people have told me they can get a contact high just listening to me sometimes, and I was probably bouncing all over. Maybe an hour into our meeting, David looked at me and said, “Jennifer, you are not using me very well.” I stopped flat in my tracks. I felt like I was getting a lot of value, and I was shocked when he said this. I asked him to explain. In response, he just asked me a few questions.

David: I think it was something like this:

• What percentage of time are you listening versus talking?

• What percentage of time would you like to be listening versus talking?

Jennifer: I realized that I was just using David as a sounding board, and I was not focusing on what I really wanted to accomplish. Ironically, at that moment, I had been very conscious about why I was telling this story, “David, I’m going to tell you about a situation and I want your reaction.” Other times, I was conscious about saying, “David, I have a difficult situation and I need you to walk me through this.” I run very fast at times—I get excited about the moment in front of me and I do not always hold myself accountable for how I use my coach. And David called me on it.

This single comment from David, that I was not using him well, is where I truly started to understand the importance of slowing down in order to go fast. I had so much to talk about that day, but I was not covering it in any kind of structured way. David’s comment has stayed with me for years now—how do I want to use my coach, how do I want to use my time, how do I want to use the opportunity in front of me? It reinforced the message from our last meeting—I need to focus on what is most important.

So I learned how to work better with my coach, but I also learned how to work better with me. I’d start to ask myself, “So,
Jennifer, this is all very interesting, but is it going back to what you really want to accomplish and what you really want to be?” I learned there are some things I have to shed over time, even if those are the things that came so naturally and helped me be successful in the first place. If I was going to grow, I had to focus on the next set of things. Focus, focus, focus. Without David constantly holding that mirror up for me, I would naturally gravitate in a direction that I was used to. I’d find myself saying, “Wow! I have a whole bag of cool rocks!” But do I have the gold nugget? That is the real question.

Our Fourth Coaching Conversation

David: We met again two and a half months later. Jennifer had worked with her manager, using the approach we put together last time, to create a new, larger role for herself. It was actually quite exciting to see what they had come up with. She would now be working in a more strategic, cross-functional capacity on a critical part of the business. This was the perfect role to explore the topics Jennifer had wanted to work on from the beginning, and by this point the foundation had already been laid. Jennifer came in to this session with a clear picture of what was most important for her and what she wanted to get from me. When she laid out her agenda, including a description of what she wanted from me, I broke into a huge grin.

Jennifer: It actually made a physical difference for me. I felt much clearer and calmer to have my priorities identified, not just for this meeting, but for all my important meetings. In fact, I put time for reflecting and planning on my calendar every day, from 5:00–5:30, where I’d think about my goals and the most important things I needed to accomplish tomorrow to get there.

That day, with my coach, I wanted to work on navigating the politics of the new world I was entering and figure out how to establish credibility and good working relationships with some of the key people, especially Xuan Bui. I was moving into a newly established lab manager role, and Xuan was the head of the organization I’d be working in. He had a reputation for being brilliant and demanding, and I was a bit intimidated. I really wanted David’s help on figuring out what to do. Actually, I was not too good with politics, and I was hoping he could just tell me what to do. Instead, he did his usual thing of asking me questions to get me to think it through for myself.

David: There is a school of thought in coaching that says people have all the answers within themselves. I do not necessarily accept that, but I do think it is the best place to start. Let us find out what Jennifer already knows and build on that. But more important, the questions that I ask can serve as a framework for helping Jennifer think similar problems through for herself in the future. My role as a coach is not to teach people skills (although that is part of what I do); I see my role as to help people become better learners. By asking Jennifer a
set of systematic questions, across a range of different scenarios, she would start to internalize the process. One of the simplest set of questions is also one of the most profound (this approach is elaborated in Peterson, 2003):

- What is your goal? What do you care about?
- What does the other person care about? What are his or her concerns?
- Where can you find the win/win so you both get your needs met?

We applied these questions to Jennifer’s next meeting with Xuan. As is typical for Jennifer and many others, her immediate responses addressed the short-term, tactical matters at hand. By continued probing, and occasionally offering other possibilities, Jennifer expanded her list of objectives to include “build a better relationship, learn more about his priorities, convey my commitment to his organization’s success, and so forth.” When I probed about her view of Xuan’s goals and priorities, she had a very narrow, tactical list as well. To help broaden her perspective, I suggested other items that are often important to senior leaders, such as “not waste time, be seen as an expert, be seen as a credible leader, and so forth.” The list may seem obvious, but it is remarkable how easily people violate those expectations when they fail to consciously include them as criteria in how they work with others. In fact, politics is often as simple as keeping in mind the personal priorities and concerns that people have (e.g., feeling respected, feeling important, not looking foolish, increasing or maintaining their power) as well as the business priorities (see Peterson, 2003).

I believe that most managers are good problem solvers, and Jennifer is extremely talented in this area. When we took the time to map out the full agenda (i.e., goals, values, concerns) that she and Xuan brought to their meetings and treat each aspect as an important criteria, she was quick to find a solution that made sense. Given that we did not have a clear and accurate picture of what was really important to Xuan, she would still have to explore this area during the actual meeting and consider various solutions along the way. But this conversation helped Jennifer feel much more confident that she could manage the politics, to a great extent because it was easy for her to tune into what people cared about.

Jennifer: I also wanted to get up to speed quickly on strategy, since this was a key part of my new job. David pushed back, saying I did not need the class. This is actually a topic that we still talk about today—my need to feel like an expert. I feel like I should know the technical details of any area that I work in. David has pushed me to rely on my skills as a leader and project manager to add value and then to be more systematic in learning from those around me. His idea was that, instead of taking a class, I should spend more time with a range of people, talking to them about how they viewed strategy. In essence, I could use this both to build relationships and learn at the same time. I actually learned a lot from this, not just about strategy, but about how people saw the business. I saw that some people could look at the business very strategically, as a whole business, and others might be more focused just on the technology or on their particular functional perspective. And, to my surprise, admitting some of my ignorance actually helped build my credibility with people—they liked the
fact that I came and talked to them about their perspective.

Our Fifth and Final Coaching Session in the First Round of Coaching

David: My typical engagement is four half-day sessions with people, although that is very flexible depending on the needs of the person I’m working with. In Jennifer’s case, mainly because she took on a major new role, we continued for one additional session where we strategized how she would use what she had learned in this new environment. We practiced a number of upcoming conversations in order to fine tune and solidify what we had been working on. We closed our final session with a detailed summary of what we had covered and what Jennifer had learned so far.

Jennifer: When I started working with David, I thought I knew exactly what I wanted. He helped me see a whole new perspective on what I needed. David’s big coaching to me has always been, “You are good, Jennifer, but you could be really good.” That is the Zen of what we worked on. How to be great when being good is actually good enough—how to go beyond where you are.

At a certain point in everyone’s growth, you have to transition from the standard set of tools you have always been using to a different set of tools. You have to learn to use different parts of your brain and stretch your comfort zone. That is what David did for me: It was that realization—that I needed to reflect and go outside my comfort zone to jar myself out of how I had always done things. I had created my own snare; I was blaming my management for never giving me new opportunities, but the reality was that I was not creating them for myself. I was not allowing myself to move forward.

I learned a lot of other things from David, too, but when I try to put the important lessons into words, it is actually quite short and simple:

- Be clear on my goals. Think about what I want to do strategically.
- Keep the goal in sight, so I do not get distracted by the good things that I can do but focus on doing the great things. Make that discipline a habit.
- Slow down to go fast. I had to learn to reflect on what’s important and what I want to do. I did not need to improve because something was broken but because I needed to flex new muscles.
- Manage the interaction rather than just go with the flow. Take responsibility for achieving what is most important.

I learned a lot of skills and techniques as well—how to be a better listener, strategic thinking, influence, managing politics, and so forth, but they did not transform me. The magic was in David continually pointing out where a few simple habits were leading me down one path when—whether I knew it or not—I really wanted to go down another. He was gentle but incredibly persistent in holding me accountable. That is
what made the difference. That is the alchemy of coaching.

**David:** That is often the case with people in coaching. The list of what they learned is rarely impressive in and of itself. It often consists of simple principles that everyone already knows at one level. What makes coaching effective is that it makes these simple insights tangible and visceral at the precise moment they matter. It takes the lesson from a trite principle to a specific choice and a specific action at the moment of truth. Coaching is about cultivating a deeper level of insight that leads to the right action at the right time.

**Our Second Round of Coaching, 2002–2003**

**Jennifer:** A year and a half later, I had been promoted to a director-level position back in R&D and was now working directly for Xuan Bui. The manager that I had been so intimidated by 18 months ago was now taking me under his wing. He saw something in me that was a direct outcome of my work with David. Instead of merely doing a great job with the assignments I was given, I had become a “white space manager.” In addition to my formal job, I would seek out the sticky issues that fell between the cracks. Instead of waiting for someone else to give me a big assignment, I was now creating my own challenges to stretch and grow. Xuan had a tendency to throw big challenges at people anyway, so he seemed to appreciate my willingness to step in. Wow, was I getting stretched now.

**David:** As I watched Jennifer in our first meeting in well over a year, I was struck by how clear and confident she sounded. She never went off on a tangent, a tendency that had typified our earliest conversations. She was just as engaging, dynamic, and warm as ever, but she was clear and focused. She seemed far more powerful than when I had last seen her. It looked as if she had gained 5 years of seasoning in just 18 months.

**Jennifer:** The first thing we worked on in that meeting was revising my priority grid to sort out the truly important tasks from the others. I had to raise the bar on who I was willing to annoy and how much. David asked me what percentage of the time I felt stretched and what
percentage of the time was I hearing new feedback from my managers or peers instead of the same old feedback. We then jumped into setting long-range goals and priorities and establishing metrics and accountabilities for those goals.

In that very first meeting, we developed a personal model of leadership that made sense for me:

- Paint a vision;
- set the strategy to get there;
- communicate, communicate, communicate (to motivate, engage, and guide people);
- build the team (essentially, coach, enable, and empower people to do what they need);
- hold people accountable; and
- measure success.

Like many of the topics we discussed, it looks simple, and I already had a solid foundation for all these tasks. But I had to sharpen my game and rise up to a whole new standard. I have always felt most comfortable leading from a position of expertise and formal authority. David was helping me to see that I could play a leadership role even when I did not know all the details. Instead of me painting the vision and setting the strategy, I learned to follow a process of leadership where my role was to make sure that the vision and strategy got created by the team. I began to see that leadership was less about doing everything with the team and more about building a team that together can do everything.

David: Jennifer, through our previous work together and her own experiences, had learned most of the skills that she needed. By the end of our first meeting, it was clear (thinking in terms of the development pipeline), that there were only a few areas where she needed new capabilities. Most of what she needed was help in thinking through how to attack new kinds of situations. Most of our time together in the first round of coaching had focused on insight (what does it take to really be successful), building capabilities, and then finding places where she could apply and test those new capabilities in real-world practice. Now I could see that our work needed to shift to a different aspect of insight (What does Jennifer want to accomplish in her leadership role?) and to the next level of real-world practice (How can Jennifer combine her skills in new ways to face ever-changing challenges?). As a result, we redesigned our meeting schedule. Instead of half-day sessions, we agreed to meet every month or two, for no more than 2 hr at a time. During those 2 hr, my role was dramatically different. I might only ask a few questions and make a few suggestions. Sometimes, just being with Jennifer allowed her to step back and work the process by herself. As we work together now, I often feel like I’m working myself out of a job with Jennifer—in fact, that is my ultimate agenda. One of
my most important goals is to help the people I work with become more independent learners so they do not need me.

Jennifer: It is interesting that David mentions that. I’ve worked with a dozen coaches over the years in different programs, and I had my pick of who I could chose to work with this time. I chose David because from the very first moment we met he was different from the others. Most coaches wanted to give me my 360 and then go straight to the development needs, just like I did. David told me to ignore the feedback until I understood where I really wanted to go and what was most important to me. From the very first meeting, I felt like David believed that I could do anything. It took a while to figure out what that was, but then the rest was easier and more valuable.

I know it cannot be easy to see the potential in everyone. It is not easy to believe in the person. David talks about being a great coach, not just settling for being a good coach. Well, there is one way that I saw that come through. David believed in me. He said, “Here you are, Jennifer, now let us look at all that you can do. You are good, but you could be great.” He pushed me hard to grow, but he never projected his needs or expectations on me.

I called David back to be my coach because I knew he would push me and he would help me figure out what I needed. Anyone could have done a 360 and taught me some new skills. There are lots of things I could work on, but David always asked what is the absolute best thing and never let me settle for less.

The attitude that David projected in our first meeting was that, even if he just had a 6-month contract with me, he was looking at the long haul. He was not coaching me for where I was right now, but for where I could be someday in the future. He brings incredible patience and respect.

Even now, as David says, he may only ask a few questions or make a few comments in our meetings, but his words resonate at multiple levels. I understand it at one level, and it is useful. But as I think about it, it is richer. His messages tie together and build from one meeting to the next. They make me think. I’ve worked with coaches who have been very helpful, but the minute I leave the meeting, I’m off to the next thing. They did not make me think. That is why I wanted to work with David again.

Round Two: Our Second Coaching Conversation

David: Jennifer walked into this meeting feeling the weight of the business on her shoulders. These were the days of the technology slowdown, after the Internet bubble imploded, and, as Jennifer said, “The only good news for us is that we’re not alone; everyone else is hurting, too.” She was involved in another workforce reduction, one that involved shutting down an entire lab. She wanted to talk about how to lead in a tense, difficult environment.
where the future was uncertain.

**Jennifer:** My energy was zapped. We had put so much effort into how to handle a series of crises that we had little energy left over for managing the aftereffects. We were having to reprioritize all our projects, and there was this incredible undertow of chaos and uncertainty. With my team, I was focusing on one aspect of the leadership model we had built last time—communicating what was going on. It was hard to paint the vision right now, so I did my best to communicate what I could. I’ve always been open with my communications, but David suggested I think about three categories:

1. Emphasize what is constant. For example, I helped people see that the foundation of HP’s mission and values was a real anchor for us. I talked about how my own mission as a leader, and the principles that I stood for, were not going to change. Finally, our top priority business objectives were not going to change; the need to hit key milestones and deliverables was certain.

2. Communicate clearly what is changing. I tried to lay out a systematic picture of what was changing and why. Instead of a simple message like, “business is bad, so we have to cut back,” I tried to show them how specific changes in customer demands and our competition were driving the need to reprioritize certain projects. Even though it was a huge and traumatic change, what we were going through was not entirely random.

3. Be explicit about what is not clear. I also wanted to communicate what I did not know. Rumors often started because people would make up stories to fill the vacuum. By telling people what was constant, what was changing, and what was unknown, I could not alleviate their fears, but I could engender a little more trust and sense of team.

**David:** We discussed three other important issues. First was the ever-present theme of focusing on top priorities. That would be particularly important now, because in times of crisis it is easy for people to become reactive and therefore scattered. By focusing on a few key issues, she and her team would be more likely to deliver tangible successes that would boost morale. Second was highlighting the opportunity for Jennifer to step up her leadership. She had established herself as a trusted and respected leader, and here was an opportunity to rally people around an agenda. It was the first completely “white space” leadership opportunity she’d had. Third was to explore ways for Jennifer to take care of herself. She was clearly stressed by everything going on around her, and her leadership capacities would begin to suffer if she did not ensure that she was being nourished. Jennifer was quick to see that she needed to take this message to her team as well.
Round Two: Our Third Coaching Conversation

David: Jennifer had just received her annual performance review the week before we met. She received a glowing review overall but was concerned that of the five categories that Xuan examined, not all of them were outstanding. I was amused by the fact that she was unhappy with his ratings but had rated herself lower than Xuan did in every single category. As she said, “I’m a tough grader on myself, but I still want the A from other people.”

This became a pivotal conversation for Jennifer. As I listened to her summarize Xuan’s feedback and her reactions, it was apparent that Xuan and I saw many of the same issues with Jennifer. He told her, “You always dive for the ball yourself. You take on too much and try to drive everything yourself.” He emphasized the need to raise her level of leadership to the next level. From Xuan’s perspective, she was doing a great job in her current role and was ready to start preparing for the next level position. Jennifer’s reaction was that she still had a lot of work to do at this level. In some ways, this sounded like the Jennifer I had met in our very first meeting years ago—although she was now playing at a much higher level, she still wanted to perfect this game before even considering a move to the next.

Jennifer: I was totally consumed by what was happening around me, and it was out of control. Xuan and David helped me realize that I had gone back to thinking about what was happening next week and next month. I had to move on to start thinking about what was going to happen 2 years from now. I needed a framework for managing year-over-year execution so I could learn how to build an organization, not just a team of people. It was the same old lesson again, just taken to the next level. I hope that I can internalize the lesson this time, that it is not just about continually stretching myself, but about figuring out the next game and learning the new set of rules. I do not have to be perfect at this level before I can advance to the next.

Round Two: Ongoing Conversations

David: Throughout 2003, Jennifer and I continued to meet for 2-hr face-to-face meetings approximately every other month. Early in the year, I suggested that we had reached a logical conclusion to our work together, at least until Jennifer’s next promotion. She requested that we continue meeting to help make sure she stays grounded in what she has learned. My current coaching with Jennifer is totally different than when we started. Originally, we focused on insight and capabilities. Now, we focus much more on real-world practice and accountability—staying focused on the goal, persisting, applying skills in new situations, and really getting good at using what she has learned.

In our meetings at this point, the chief value is that Jennifer takes time to reflect by talking through her situation and her plans with me—something she might not do if I was not there. Once in a while, I still find myself pushing and challenging her to aim higher. Like anyone operating in...
such an intense environment, Jennifer can become absorbed in the tactical aspects of her job, so I remind her to stay grounded in her highest priorities. And in other meetings, we just share stories, like good friends, which solidifies the bond we have as well as reinforces the lessons she has learned.

It has been a rich and rewarding journey for both of us, and so we have the opportunity to share some of our insights with others.

**Lessons for Coaches and Participants**

*Jennifer:* Watching what my coach did, and comparing that to what I’ve seen with other coaches, here is the advice I’d give:

- **Take the long view.** Even if you just have a 6 month contract, build a foundation that will help that person his or her entire life. Approach your coaching as if you were entering into a long-term commitment, and try to help the person go beyond where that person thinks he or she can go.

- **Get to the heart of things.** Almost everyone you work with will have complex issues and multiple levels to explore, so you need to be clear on your purpose and stay grounded in what really matters the most. It is easy for me to get distracted with the crisis of the moment, so your role as coach is always to move people closer to the core, to stay connected to the fundamental purpose. You have to be patient with the person’s distractions, but you do not have to follow them yourself.

- **Be totally committed to the person.** My coach had an amazing ability to focus on me. I never felt his ego influencing our agenda. Every time we met, he helped me unfold and reveal something deeper and truer about me.

- **Make it real.** Even though we spent so much time on insight and reflection, my coach always asked, “So what are you going to do about it?” There was always an emphasis on action. Even though I’m an action-oriented person, I could have spun around in circles waiting for things to crystallize. It seemed like every new insight led to some specific action. And that new action then provided clarification and deepening of the insight.

- **Do not sugarcoat things.** My coach never bombarded me with feedback; in fact, he would err on the side of not giving me too much of it. I’m sure David saw things the first day he met me that he never mentioned until months later. Still, when I needed to hear something, he held up the mirror and made it so clear that I could not avoid it. Without a hint of judgment or evaluation, he would provide a reflection of what I really needed to hear, at that moment, to continue making progress.
• Make the person work. There were so many times when I wanted my coach to give me a simple answer to my question. I do not think he ever did. He would always share his perspective but only after he asked me the questions to think it through for myself. And it was always worth it, because I learned I could usually find my own way. The times when I could not figure it out for myself, I had a greater appreciation for the answer that he would share. Always, I had to take ownership for the decision myself.

I also learned an important lesson about how to get the most value from coaching:

• Be clear on what you want from your coach and from each meeting. A good coach can help you learn in many ways, but part of the challenge is for you to figure out how you can use your coach to best advantage. That starts with knowing exactly what you want to get from your coaching. It is important to be diligent about your purpose, how you work with your coach, and what you want from each session.

David: Jennifer has reminded me what a joy it is to work with enthusiastic learners. She demonstrates the best qualities of an active, engaged participant. Anyone who wishes to benefit from coaching could emulate her in the following ways:

• Balance skepticism and trust. Jennifer rarely took anything I said at face value. She would question and challenge and debate my suggestions, and yet she always took me seriously. She listened carefully, tested ideas out, and then was willing to go try new things. She was willing to grapple with ideas and figure out what really made sense for her style and her needs.

• Make learning a priority. Jennifer clearly wanted to improve her skills so she could gain new opportunities and make a bigger contribution at work. She had a demanding job when we met, and she has a much larger and much more demanding job today. Yet she always finds time to try new approaches to what she’s doing. Jennifer has also made a commitment to coaching and developing others, which is just another way she demonstrates that learning is a priority.

• Balance humility and confidence. This is a hard quality to describe, but Jennifer demonstrates this better than any person I have known. The humility shows up constantly in Jennifer’s willingness to seek advice, to listen to other people’s point of view, to be open to changing her own approach. I even suggested to her that at times she may appear naïve or in-
experienced when she seems so enthusiastically curious about what other people would do without making it clear that she knows what she is doing. Yet she balances this humility and openness with forceful resolve. Jennifer has strong values and strong opinions on many topics. She will not back down from a debate. She has raised issues with senior management that others are reluctant to surface. When she takes on a task, she throws herself into it fully. So that quality, of pursuing things with confidence and yet having the humility to listen to others and adapt when necessary has enabled her to strike a harmonious balance between taking strong leadership positions on issues and acting decisively while remaining constantly open to learning.

• If you want to be coached, be coachable.4 I believe that Jennifer has attracted so many mentors and advocates in her career for the same reasons that I loved working with her. Because she is so warm, enthusiastic, and appreciative, I am even more willing to give of myself for her. Those qualities come naturally to Jennifer, but anyone who actively engages his or her coach and expresses such positive energy and enthusiasm will gain significantly from the effort.

In terms of lessons that might be helpful for other coaches, two things stand out from my work with Jennifer:

• Do not fall in love with your tools. Jennifer needed a certain kind of coaching early in our work and a very different kind of coaching as time went on. I had to adapt my approach to always meet her where she was. The development pipeline is a helpful framework for thinking about the person’s needs at different points in time, but even within that, coaches will benefit from a large, flexible tool-kit that offers multiple ways to cultivate insight or provide accountability.

• Be clear about your purpose. Jennifer is such a charming, engaging, and dynamic personality that it would be easy to just follow her lead. I am certain that I could have been helpful to Jennifer had we just worked on the issues that she requested and the topics that she presented. But I have spent a lot of time thinking about my purpose as a coach. Number one is a commitment to helping the person achieve what he or she most values. For Jennifer, that required that I ignore some of what she was asking for and push her to a different realm. At any given moment, it would have been easy to be seduced by the tactical issues and easy answers that Jennifer was searching for. But if I had, I do not think we’d still be working together again 3 years later.

This advice applies on multiple levels: Be clear on your purpose as a coach, your purpose in working with each person, your purpose in each session, and your purpose at each moment. None of these is easy to attain, and I drift all the time.

4This is an adaptation of a quote from Ovid: “If you want to be loved, be lovable.”
For Jennifer, I had to be clear on my purpose so we would not skate along from one issue to the next, having a great time but never wrestling with the deeper issues. For other participants, I have to be clear on my purpose or else I’ll get bored to tears with how simple and even trivial their issues are. For others, I have to be clear on my purpose or I’ll get frustrated because they’re not making progress at the speed I think they should. Sometimes I have to remind myself that my purpose is not to have them be ideal coaching clients, but to help them achieve what they most value. And I have to accept them for who they are and work with them at their pace and in their style.

**Conclusion**

*David:* Over the 3 years that we worked together, I helped Jennifer learn or improve in at least a dozen skill areas: delegating, coaching, prioritization and time management, leadership, communication, networking, managing upward, influencing, listening skills, organizational politics, stress management, coping with ambiguity, and so forth. Yet that is not what this story is about. The story of Jennifer’s transformation is really about one or two simple lessons that she has taken and applied to increasingly greater and more complex challenges. The theme, which she has had to relearn at ever deeper levels, is to be clear and grounded in what is most important and make decisions based on the long-term priorities rather than the pressing needs of the moment. It is a simple lesson, perhaps, but one with profound implications.

Working with Jennifer over an extended period of time has helped me stay grounded in my own highest priorities as well. I am embarrassed to admit how many times I’ve found myself emphasizing some point to Jennifer about staying focused while thinking, “David, you better listen to yourself.” No matter how good, or even great, I ever become as a coach, I always see how much I have to learn from my clients in being a better and more complete person. Jennifer, like other clients of mine, is able to accomplish things in her job that I could never do. I am grateful to Jennifer, and to all my clients, for the opportunity to work with them and for all that they have taught me.

*Jennifer:* Besides being fun, working on this article allowed me to reflect on what I’ve learned and see the progress I’ve made. Overall, I have to admit I’m a real stubborn case. I think David picked me to write about in this article because I was such a challenge. Throughout my career, people have given me great advice, like telling me to be more focused. But just giving the advice—or the feedback or whatever—has never been enough. So to get me to stop and actually change was huge.

Coaching had real value in forcing me to take time to reflect. Momentarily going slow prepared me to go faster and farther in the long run. Finding the right coach has increased my potential to take my career farther than I ever thought possible 3 years ago. Back then, I was stubbornly committed to being good at everything I did. Now I see that being great at the important things feels a heck of a lot better, and that
drive has pushed me way past limits that I only thought I had.

Epilogue

David: Since September 2004, Jennifer has been working as part of a hand-chosen “war room” operational team to help reposition one of HP’s biggest businesses. She is now serving two levels above her previous role, reporting to an executive vice president. Just before this article went to press, she was told that she was being recommended for a role at that level, largely because of her performance on the war room team. This two-level move is striking because it is happening in a static job environment where few people have had opportunities for significant advancement, and even meaningful lateral career moves are scarce.

Jennifer: This latest move was like being put on a rocket. Some of the depth of what I worked on with David has only now become apparent to me. His coaching to take time to think has been essential. There are even more temptations and distractions at this level. The sense of urgency on this project was almost overwhelming, so being able to take control of my time and stay focused on the right process has been the single most influential thing that has contributed to my growth as a leader and enabled the scope of the work that I’ve been able to accomplish.

References


