



Case Study: Executive Coaching

Meet Anita, a high potential regional manager in a public sector organization.

Leadership Focus: Executive Communication

Anita oversaw a small staff responsible for developing and sustaining productive relationships with a wide variety of stakeholders in a multi-state territory. Anita herself was expected to foster cross-boundary collaboration and build strategic partnerships by reaching out to senior peers across the private and public sectors, as well as within her own organization.

The Challenge

Anita had received direct, written feedback from her boss that came as a shock: she “needed to work on her executive communication.” She was critiqued for bypassing her direct manager and raising issues with his boss. Anita’s boss saw her as ineffective at cultivating stakeholder relationships. Anita realized she had lost the trust of her senior leaders. She felt demoralized and upset with herself but was committed to turn things around.

Desired Result

Above all else, Anita wanted to repair the relationships with her seniors and be considered an influential leader who communicates calmly and effectively. Anita knew that if others were to see her in a more positive light, she had to work on managing her own emotions and reactions so she would feel more grounded and confident in her own leadership abilities. Successful coaching would also produce evidence that she had regained the trust of her managers.

Coaching Focus:

Anita and I worked to help her develop a keener awareness of her own emotions and how she was coming across to others. Anita saw that her emotions were driving behaviors that were damaging her working relationships.

The Coaching Process

Anita and I began by exploring the feelings and looping self-talk that came up when she interacted with her seniors. She knew she let her emotions get the best of her – if she was upset or off balance, her emotions ratcheted up and her voice became shrill. Her energy pushed people away. She also knew she tended to advocate too strongly for her position, with the result that her influence efforts fell flat.

Anita used focused journaling exercises to help her notice when she was getting spun up, listen to her inner dialogue, and reflect on how her mood impacted her leadership, relationships, and personal well-being. As a result, she recognized that when she became upset or pushed too hard, she made a number of negative assessments about others or about herself, and she wasn't at her best.

Choices

We brainstormed several strategies Anita started using to help her manage her emotions:

- journaling and simple mindfulness exercises helped her rebalance her brain, body, and emotions. Using these techniques, Anita was able to shift from being reactive to being intentional about what she said – or didn't say.
- connecting our work to other domains of her life enabled her to see she was rushing through work and home life, even getting worked up in traffic on her commute home. She discovered that slowing down was key to her ability to manage her emotions.

Anita realized she could use her awareness of how to better manage her emotions and reactions to become much more effective in the office as well. She began:

- using mindful 1-minute transitions between meetings;
- setting intentions for what she wanted to accomplish in meetings;
- sketching out questions to ask her staff, bosses, and partners; and
- using two-column notetaking to help her become a better listener. She took notes on the substance of meetings on the right, and captured additional questions, impressions, and reminders that emerged during the meeting on the left.

Outcomes of Coaching

Anita broke a habit of interrupting others. By listening and inquiring more, she learned more from conversations.

She connected better with her staff, gained confidence in their knowledge, and cut meeting times by half.

A sign of their increasing confidence in her leadership, Anita's managers gave her a leadership role in a regional reorganization. She mentored junior managers as they established strategic alliances with important partners.

Anita managed a complex personnel challenge that unfolded over several months with intention, compassion, rigor, and grace. Her superiors noticed and respected the skillful way she handled this difficult and emotionally challenging situation.

Anita continues to use the strategies she practiced during our coaching work as she prepares for a new, broader leadership role that will require skillful command of influence skills.



Key Success Factors

Anita sought out and was open to coaching. She knew that a lot was 'on the line,' from her personal feelings to her job. She was ready to try new approaches to managing her emotions.

- Journaling and self-reflection helped her expand her awareness of how her emotions and 'inner mental soundtrack' were keeping her from being effective at connecting and communicating with others.
- She invested time and effort to experiment with new techniques. She noticed they helped her slow down so she could be present, listen with curiosity, and ask questions. She got different – and better – results and was able to keep her emotions in check and access her knowledge, wisdom, capacity for caring, and good judgment.

As a result of her investment in coaching, Anita's professional relationships are stronger, more influential, and contribute more impact to her organization's mission.

