

A Best-Practice Case: How to coach an LWS Passive/Defensive profile



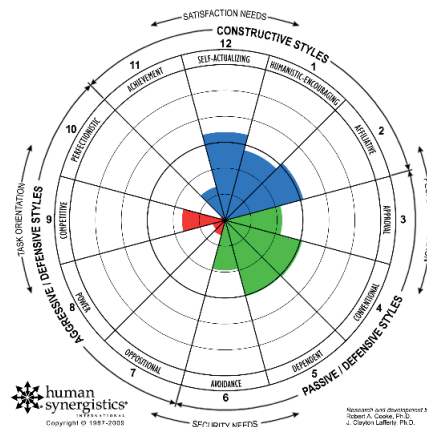
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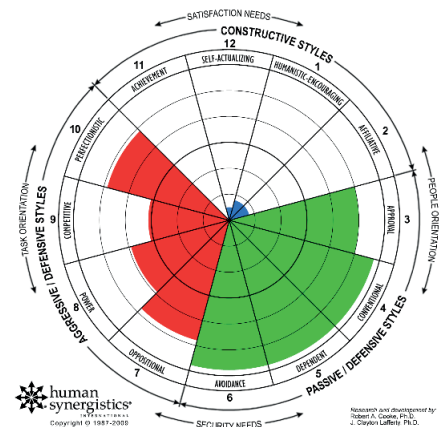
“The coach must nonetheless remain open, be aware of the participant’s feelings and if necessary, adapt the program to suit the needs of the participant.”

Nhu Ton Nu Quynh has been with Novartis Vietnam for four years and was Talent Management and Organizational Development-cum-HR Business Partner (she left the company in 2020 and is now working for De Heus LLC.) In 2016 she completed her training in Human Synergistics’ LWS/OCI instruments and has since been involved in several OCI and LWS projects. This article will focus on one specific LWS project which utilized a specialized long-term coaching program to support leadership development - benefiting the focal participant, coach and ultimately, the company itself. Enthusiastic and deeply convinced by this process, Ms. Ton Nu Quynh has kindly offered to reveal her best practices in order to “share these successful practices for others to benefit”.

THE PROFILES



Graph 1: Self-Assessment Profile



Graph 2: Description by Others Profile

In general, the self-description profile is characterized by strong defensive styles with a clear tendency toward Passive/Defensive behavior. The self-description possesses very low extensions and is almost a “constricted” profile. However, a 1-3 combination emerges - the Constructive (blue) and Passive (green) clusters being the most extended, with very low extensions in the Aggressive (red) styles.

The feedback profile is quite different from the self-description: strong extensions are visible, mainly in Passive/Defensive behaviors (all above the 90th percentile) with a clear Style 3-6 combination. Extensions are also quite high in both the Oppositional and Perfectionistic styles. Few Constructive styles are described in the feedback. This kind of combination is quite frequent and usually characterizes a “sensitive, thoughtful leader, possessing conventional values and beliefs, who experiences feelings of insecurity about social and work-related abilities. Although supportive of organizational policies and procedures, may have difficulty taking charge or acting decisively in a leadership role” (from Human Synergistics’ “LWS Reporting System”, copyright 2020 by Human Synergistics International. All rights reserved. Research and developed by Robert A. Cooke, PhD and J. Clayton Lafferty, PhD.)

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Novartis has a long experience in using Human Synergistics Leadership Workstyle™ (LWS) – along with other tools such as the Organizational Culture Inventory®(OCI®) – to develop their leaders, using the data and feedback to develop “High Performing Leadership Teams”. With regard to their development purposes, Nhu Ton Nu Quynh considers this tool to be the most effective in providing leaders with deep and personalized insights into their leadership style and behavior. Furthermore, LWS provides detailed feedback regarding how one’s leadership style is influencing one’s ability to perform and lead effectively. From our experience, such development programs are particularly successful if:

- The company supports leaders in their personal development (not only by completing the LWS but also via coaching, follow-up etc.)
- A long-term coaching program is implemented to support learning and facilitate development.

In this specific case: not only was the participant involved in the LWS process, but also the line Manager. As a coach, Ms. Ton Nu Quynh, who was eager to promote the greatest impact and benefit from the LWS tool, designed a development journey with several debriefing and coaching sessions to support feedback and insights provided by the LWS. In addition, the LWS Workbook was also utilized and found to be very helpful, to both the coach and the participant.

THE PROCESS

After completing an LWS project, Ms. Ton Nu Quynh organized the following development program with the focal participant:

- One debriefing session directly after the project, in order to go through the report and identify key learnings and essential information;
- Six regularly scheduled coaching sessions that aim to follow-up and support the leader in the development journey (based on outlines of the LWS Workbook).

The purpose of this debriefing session was to provide the leader (hereafter called “participant”) with an initial insight into the LWS results, and to create a

certain degree of awareness necessary to guarantee a commitment from the participant into their personal development. To do so, Nhu Ton Nu Quynh decided, during that session, to go over the Human Synergistics Circumplex model, to explain and introduce the report and its results to the participant. According to our accredited practitioners, this first session is crucial and can be very challenging as the focal participant discovers their profile for the first time. For Ms. Ton Nu Quynh, this was an opportunity to get to know the participant better - by asking questions about their current situation, future expectations, etc. - but also to further “observe” the participant and their reactions. It is often the case that during this debriefing session participants will start to play out the styles in their profile: though not systematic, an individual with aggressive styles within their profile may start to refuse the feedback by questioning the tool and the accuracy of the feedback. An individual with strong Passive styles within their profile will often reject the results and instead shift the responsibility to others, arguing that the respondents do not understand them well enough. The latter case happened with Ms. Ton Nu Quynh: as the participant saw the report and was rather “surprised and confused”. “I don’t understand the feedback” were the participant’s very first words when they discovered the Description-by-Others profile.

Human Synergistics often receives questions from Accredited Practitioners about what to do in such situations. How does one respond and make sure that the participant will remain open to the report’s feedback so that they may use the results as a basis to start their personal development? Nhu Ton Nu Quynh used this opportunity to show the participant how their reaction to the report was actually a demonstration of their Passive behavior. To put something concrete behind the data is highly efficient and usually catches the participant’s attention on their day-to-day behaviors.

However, this also represents a lot of information as Nhu Ton Nu Quynh quickly noticed: the “shock” of the profile as well as the large amount of data that the participant receives can be confusing and makes it difficult for them to really grasp the content and message behind the report. Therefore, the coach felt it more appropriate to stop the debriefing session – halfway through - in order to leave time to the participant to assimilate, go through the report again and “digest” the results until the next coaching session.

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The ability of the coach to listen, understand, and adapt to the participant's need and situation is key to promoting understanding and create a setting in which reflection, learning, and ultimately development can take place and to build trust between the coach and the participant.

The next session unfolded in a better way as:

- The participant benefited from the debriefing session and took time to further think about the LWS report, the results and their meaning. Ms Ton Nu Quynh observed that the participant was in a better state of mind and more keen to talk about it;
- Ms Ton Nu Quynh also met the Line Manager of the participant, to ensure they also support the participant's personal development and to have a better view on the business objectives and make sure that they align with the participant's development;
- Ms Ton Nu Quynh asked the participant to prepare for the session beforehand by thinking of situations where they interacted with the respondents (i.e. Direct Reports, Peers, Higher level Manager) and to try to recognize the behaviors that they use. This is particularly important, according to Nhu Ton Nu Quynh, as a way to create further awareness by focusing on concrete relations between the participant's experience and the Circumplex styles. As she emphasizes "it is important to make it tangible and real, and not just some abstract concept".

Interestingly however, Nhu Ton Nu Quynh kept facing Passive behavior as, after understanding and accepting the results coming from the report, the participant was waiting and expecting the coach to come up with a fully prepared development plan and to suggest next steps. This is again a frequent reaction that Accredited Practitioners observed with Passive/defensive profiles.

How to handle this?

As Nhu Ton Nu Quynh explained several times along the interview, the role of the coach is to guide the participant in their development but the participant should be the one doing the work.

Hence, instead of providing the participant with the expected answer and a concrete action plan that will satisfy their security need, she suggested to the participant to take time to think again about the results, about what they want to achieve, their business objectives, etc. A meeting was even suggested between the line manager and the participant to align on the last point. More direct feedback coming from the team and the respondents also appeared to be necessary, to support the quantitative data coming from the report with a more qualitative insight.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TEAM FEEDBACK

As part of the debriefing process, Nhu Ton Nu Quynh also planned a meeting between the participant and the respondents to collect further feedback on the participant's engagement and how they can improve their relationship with the team and their leadership skills. The role of Nhu Ton Nu Quynh, as a coach, was essential to monitor the session and make sure that the discussion will be done in a "Constructive" way. Therefore, she decided to adopt the following process: she started the session by meeting the respondents first, without the participant, to enable them to provide feedback to the coach and freely express their opinions. Then, the participant was joining the group to listen to a summary of what had been said. This exercise is very interesting and added value to the LWS results as:

- It contributed concrete examples that the participant can act upon and areas of possible development;
- As the participant was not present during the first part of the session, respondents felt free to express their opinions;
- The presence of the coach helped the participant to listen to the comments without feeling criticized.

Ms Ton Nu Quynh drew very positive conclusions from this exercise: the participant appreciated receiving this kind of feedback and was motivated to build up an action plan with clear steps and objectives related both team management, business objectives and their own personal development purposes.

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Though the confrontation with the team is not always appropriate, it could nonetheless be an opportunity to collect a more qualitative feedback that contributes to highlight further areas of development.

SHARING THE LESSONS LEARNED

This coaching experience was enriching and very positive for both the coach and the participant. The participant went through the different coaching sessions and ended up with an action plan that will help them to focus on some specific areas of development in order to include more Constructive behaviors that will help to improve the performance as a leader and the personal satisfaction at work.

As an Accredited Practitioner, Nhu Ton Nu Quynh realized and wished to share how important and efficient a coaching program is compared to a single debriefing session: this enables the coach to stay in close communication with the participant and help them to implement their action plan, to build a relationship of trust and to have the satisfaction to see the participant's improvements. Ms Ton Nu Quynh reports indeed that before the end of the journey, she noticed some changes in the participant's behaviors, that were also confirmed by some of the respondents. This echoes her purpose, as a coach, to help "leaders to be aware of their leadership styles and to have more commitment in changing their behaviors which can be recognized by others". More precisely, she considers the coach as a guide - "you really guide the participant and provide him or her with direction. It is about listening to the participant and be mindful". Therefore, she emphasizes the necessity of being well prepared, which means to be aware of the profile you will have to debrief (in order to expect some of the reactions as Nhu Ton Nu Quynh did), to plan ahead and more importantly, to know what you want to achieve and to commit to it. This will in return contribute to run the coaching program in the best possible way and to avoid some "traps" that one may meet with Passive/defensive profiles (e.g. putting responsibility onto others and asking the coach for the "magic solution").

The coach must nonetheless remain open, be aware of the participant's feelings and if necessary, adapt the program to suit the needs of the participant.