

by Wendy Gordon, BA

Help ... My Client is Brilliant!

Overcoming the challenges of coaching people with high IQs

It has happened to nearly every coach: the moment when, just after meeting a new client, you realize this person has an incredible brain. Vocabulary, experience, expertise – perhaps even arrogance – it’s all there. And then comes the sinking feeling that you’re not sure how to work with this person.

It’s not that s/he is far too successful or perfect (on the contrary, s/he may already be setting off your interpersonal alarm bells); it’s the gut feeling you have that you are about to put a concerted effort into this relationship, and s/he will stonewall every effort you make. So why the emotional wall? And more importantly, what can you do to engage this person in an effective relationship?

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People with a great deal of cognitive intelligence (high IQ) come to a coach-client relationship with a unique set of expectations and potential barriers. According to Katie Ziemer, a senior researcher at MHS (Multi-Health Systems) and a former Organizational Development consultant, brilliant people may:

- See coaching as threatening
 - Be very skeptical about the relevance of the coaching experience
 - Ask a lot of questions about your models and methods
 - Be complacent or confrontational
 - Want to “own” their personal development plan
- “These behaviors are by no means unique to people



with high IQs, but they can be amplified when a coach doubts his or her role in the coaching experience,” Ziemer says. Just because a person has a high IQ does not make him or her difficult to coach; in fact, those with above-average intelligence can be very cognizant of where their abilities lie. So why do coaches often report a great deal of stress and intimidation working with brilliant minds?

Brilliant minds are no different from others in that we all avoid vulnerability, risk, embarrassment and the appearance of incompetence. According to acclaimed business theorist Chris Argyris, “all of us design our behavior to remain in unilateral control, to maximize winning and minimize losing, and to suppress negative feelings.” If your client feels threatened, s/he may attempt to seek out your faults or attack the credibility of your practice or the assessment you use. Or, s/he may shut you out completely by refusing to acknowledge the need for, or the presence of a good coaching opportunity.

While some coaches are discouraged by what appears to be a “bad coach-client fit” and may allow the relationship to dwindle in defense, there are steps you can take to address the needs of high-IQ clients that may fortify your relationship.

1. Acknowledge that you are not an expert in your client’s subject area. You don’t need to be an ad executive to bring insight to that role. You are an expert in behavior. Focus on things your client says and does and ask how relevant your observations are on his work.

2. Have an arsenal of case data to prove relevance.

Watch For Land Mines!

Below are some examples of potentially explosive dynamics that can be amplified when your client is extremely intelligent:

You	Client	The Dynamic	The Solution
Not very assertive	Highly assertive	You feel that your client does not value the coaching opportunity, is disrespecting your time, or is being dismissive.	Be authentic. Reflect back to your client not only the facts and data he offers, but also how you are experiencing your interaction. If he isn't taking you seriously, say for example, "I'm feeling like this coaching work isn't important to you right now."
Lots of empathy	Poor empathy	You see a huge potential for change in your client, but s/he may be standoffish, irascible or rude.	Getting your client to understand the impact his/her words and behavior have on others will be a huge effort. Focus on what s/he values and use measurables whenever possible.
Impulsive	Impulsive	You might find yourself being easily drawn off track or into excessive argumentation. One or both of you might prematurely conclude that the relationship "just isn't going to work."	Remain calm and confident. Before you respond, ask yourself if your response will help the purpose of your meeting. Aim to demonstrate good impulse control and take a step back and acknowledge when you don't succeed.
Great interpersonal skills	Poor self-awareness	You find yourself taking everything this person says very personally. You may begin to feel insulted or indignant.	Talk about emotions as being just another type of data important in any decision-making process. Multi-rater (360) assessments can offer a balanced perspective and illuminate blind spots.

If using an assessment, know a few statistics that prove it relates to performance. The assessment publisher should be able to provide you with both validity information and return on investment.

3. Use other established methods that the client can relate to. SWOT analyses, gap analyses, and SMART goals may speak volumes to your business-savvy client. Be flexible enough to switch to a model your client is fluent in and you won't

struggle with additional resistance.

4. Tie your work to measurables. In your call for action, have your client identify the cost of inaction. Compare it with the potential gains of change.

5. Offer your client full control over development planning. Approach their behavior change like any other project requiring analysis and problem-solving skills. Give them a template (such as a SMART goal setting activity) and the autonomy to try

alternative approaches.

6. Capitalize on existing relationships. If working with a team, draw upon its competitive and/or collaborative nature when the organization's culture allows. If your client shares his new insights and goals, he'll be much more accountable to his colleagues.

7. Examine your own weaknesses and look for areas of imbalance in your client. Socrates' guiding rule was "know thyself," and this ancient aphorism couldn't be more relevant than in a potentially imbalanced relationship. As a coach, you're in tune with your own interpersonal dynamics. When working with high-IQ clients, anticipate potential "land-mine" combinations and how they might make you feel.

Understanding your client's level of emotional intelligence as you embark in a coaching relationship together can be immensely helpful. Whether you use the results directly to explore development opportunities, or indirectly to inform your own probing questions, a formal assessment of emotional intelligence can reveal core behaviors quickly and in an objective format.

"IQ by itself is not a strong predictor of workplace performance," says Diana Durek, a senior advisor at MHS. "While many professions require a certain degree of cognitive ability, once one is in a given role, emotional intelligence becomes the better predictor of success." The challenge is that many high performers get to senior roles based on IQ, despite lacking essential emotional management skills.

While studies don't agree on a relationship between IQ and EQ,

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“If we are **aware** of our own ego states, or subpersonalities, we can **avoid** the **countertransference** with our client and **better guide** them toward their **own self-awareness.**”

they do report better coaching outcomes when a model of emotional intelligence is part of the development program. Durek recommends that people “should only engage in processes that are consistent with

the research on how people grow and develop.” For her, this means first identifying where people want to be before embarking on any coaching plan.

However you choose to address behaviors that impact performance with your client, it’s good to keep in mind that there is always room for growth. The key to making a coaching relationship work with a high-IQ client is to acknowledge that you both have areas of expertise and can learn from each other.

Richer, more effective coach-client relationships have a positive impact on the growth of your business. The areas in which you will see change include: the sustainability of your business; better partnerships with your clients; and more

referrals for new clients. Also, the long-term effects of effectively understanding and coaching your clients will ultimately lead to increased growth of your business with a greater return on investment in the long run. So celebrate your brilliant clients, and grow your business! •

References

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