

Out of the Box Coaching Newsletter

When the Solution Becomes the Problem

by Clarence Thomson



Tracy Goss has a book, *The Last Word on Power*, for successful executives who can't succeed by doing what they've done well all their lives. She calls it *executive re-invention* for leaders who must make the impossible happen. To reinvent themselves, executives must stop doing what has worked well before. Their success is now the obstacle to doing something new.

This scheme is quite simple. She asserts that we all have an unconscious formula for success: what she calls a *winning strategy*. As long as we're in a context where our strategy works, we do well. But CEO-type folk are often asked to "turn a company around," and that first involves "re-invention" of the leader. The first step in re-invention is discernment of the "winning strategy."

Goss describes the winning strategy: 1) we are all listening for something, 2) we all expect certain actions to give power to our efforts, and 3) we all have a desired outcome in our lives.

If you know your Enneagram style, you will have a general notion of your "winning strategy." If you don't know your Enneagram style, examine yourself until you unearth your winning strategy; when you do, it will reveal your Enneagram style.

Goss gives many examples of what we listen for. They are quite specific, but any good Enneagram student could position them with an Enneagram style. For example, she gives "listening for what else is there," a classic Six pattern. She lists "what is the opportunity?" (Seven) and "what are the rules?" (One). Some listenings are not as clear—"what is the point?"—but one could certainly understand an action-oriented Three or a brusque Eight unconsciously asking that. Context would reveal the number.

Her second component of the strategy—what we expect to be powerful—is equally an Enneagram revelation. She quotes the common saying, "If all you have is a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail," and Enneagram students are aware that each Enneagram style takes a talent or strength, pushes it too far, and uses this ability too often. Sevens compulsively reframe, Threes work too hard, and Nines push an attractive humility into "I don't count" or "I'm not here."

(Continued on page 2)

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When the Solution Becomes the Problem (continued)

A good way for a coach to help people with their Enneagram style is to explore what the client voluntarily does too much. This can be tricky. Telling Fives they read too much or Threes they work too hard will often meet with resistance, because of that little word, “too.” Is three hours a day spent reading “too” much? And is a 60-hour week “too” much? You can’t say, “That’s too much.” You have to ask questions about balance, priority, and satisfaction.

We all have a desired outcome for life. Don’t trust the word “happy,” because you need to understand what makes a particular person happy. Happy Ones do not look or sound like happy Sevens, and entirely different things make them happy. But if you use the word “outcome” as a probe, a heuristic tool if you will, then you can learn why what they’re currently doing to make themselves happy isn’t working, as well as the congruence between what they’re doing and the outcome they want. Often there is a sharp conflict between what they say they want and what they really want.

I am reminded of the 2003 *Harvard Business Review* article in which they asked why people didn’t change, and discovered what people wanted consciously was in conflict with what they wanted unconsciously. The authors gave the example of a talented young black manager who didn’t do what he was easily capable of doing to get promoted. It turned out he felt a promotion would separate him from his less fortunate black brothers. Anyone think maybe he was a Six, with that kind of loyalty?

Goss wrote her book for successful executives. We’ve all been successful at some things some of the time. If we savored such success, we tend to repeat what we did then and expect the same results. Our Enneagram coping mechanisms have been successful sometime in the past and probably work a little bit right now. Healthy people do what works, fixated folks do what used to work.

The man who screams at the truck that just cut him off is doing something that worked, probably, when he was about three years old. His perceptive wife, hearing the tantrum, may accurately and unwisely comment, “Stop acting like a three year old!” When he was three, tantrums brought such immediate consolation and solution, he still uses it—with less and less of a desired outcome.



So when clients tell you they’re a bit stuck, you first want to find out what they’re doing that is *not* working. Probably the worst general advice we can give is “try harder.” The best advice, then, is “give it up.” (Then be meticulously specific.)

Be meticulously specific!

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