Executive Skills and Coaching – A Brief Introduction

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Executive Skills: Executive skills are a set of brain-based activities that make it possible for us to choose our goals and then regulate or guide our behavior in a way that makes it likely that we will reach those goals. They are also the skills that help us to avoid the behaviors that will derail our progress. When we think about the consequence of what we are about to say to our boss or to our significant other, *before* we say it, we are using an executive skill. When we close out of Facebook and begin a task that we have been procrastinating about, we are using an executive skill. When we focus on remembering the information in a report, even though it is boring, we are using an executive skill. We all have these skills and rely on them on a day-in and day-out basis to help us manage problems and challenges, and, equally important, we all have naturally occurring strengths and weaknesses in these skills, and the patterns vary from person to person. There is no one skill or cluster of skills that is necessarily better than another. For each of us, the “best” skills are the ones that allow us to most effectively manage the challenges of the daily living and work situations that we either have chosen or find ourselves in. This notion of how well our executive skills match up with the demands of the living and work contexts that we find ourselves in is central to our model.

We know now that there are situational factors that can adversely impact our ability to effectively use our executive skills. These include living under conditions of poverty, scarcity and chronic stress (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013). This breakdown in executive skills interferes with the ability to successfully overcome problems and challenges. As a result, individuals living under these conditions have a reduced capacity for self-regulation and behavioral control. Instead, behavioral decisions are driven by current circumstances and the demands of the immediate environment. The result is that the person is “locked in the present,” with a decreased capacity for what Barkley (2012), among others, calls “goal-directed persistence.”

Focused in the present, individuals in these circumstances can have trouble with the following: Keeping more distant goals in mind; creating strategies for how they will achieve their goals; inhibiting the negative feelings associated with denying or ignoring immediate needs; and being able to seek creative ways around the obstacles that arise as they try to achieve their goals. Thus, they lack access to the resources that could help to maintain focus and move steadily toward their goals. Instead, immediate demands and needs thwart their good intentions, capacity for self-regulation, and goal-directed persistence.

Goal setting and goal attainment are at the heart of the behavior change process. According to Locke and Latham (2002), goals serve four primary functions. First, they direct behavior – toward goal-relevant activities and away from goal-irrelevant activities. Second, goals energize people. Third, goals encourage persistence. Finally, goals motivate individuals to discover or use task-relevant knowledge or strategies.

People set goals because they want to change and improve their lives. In order for behavior change and maintenance of effort to occur, a person must be motivated. Goals can serve as this source of motivation and promote behavior change *if* two conditions are met. The goal must be chosen by the person, and the person must believe that the goal really can be achieved.

The likelihood of achieving a goal depends on the degree to which that goal is a “good fit” for the person. What determines this goodness of fit? We have identified three major factors:

1. **The person’s preferences**, that is jobs or careers that she finds appealing along with the skills that she currently has or is capable of acquiring through education, training, or experience. Her ability to acquire these skills if she does not already have them depends on her aptitude for learning, which could include reading and math along with verbal and nonverbal problem-solving. The key questions here is: What does the person have to acquire in terms of educational or career skills in order to reach her goal and does she have the support necessary to do this?
2. **The person’s executive skills profile**, which includes her pattern of strengths and weaknesses in executive skills along with the ways that these strengths and weaknesses are demonstrated in day-to-day situations. The question here is: Does the person’s pattern of executive skill strengths and weaknesses match up well with the skills most valued in the job or career she is interested in?
3. **The availability of support for the person**. Here, we are talking about the types of initial and ongoing support that an individual might need to accomplish her goal. Such supports could include stable housing, financial support to fund training or tuition, reliable child care, dependable access to transportation and tutoring. In addition, we include under the availability of support ongoing within-program resources as the person pursues her goal, and these would include coaching.

We have developed a coaching model to provide counselors and coaches who with a framework for understanding how conditions of scarcity and stress impact behavior. Our goal is to develop a set of strategies and tools for them to work with program participants help them assess goodness-of-fit and to support enhancement of executive skills. This in turn will facilitate the ability to set and attain goals that result in increased self-sufficiency.

In this process, the coach must be ever mindful of the “present focus” of the participant. This condition necessitates a selection of goals by the participant that initially involve very short time horizons and small steps so that the participant experiences a sense of accomplishment. With success and confidence, the time horizon can be extended.