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## New Kid on the Block: Why an Executive Coach is NOT a Teacher!

### Series: Part 5

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Consider the difference between a coach and a teacher. In practice the two functions overlap, but the distinction between the two is real. In essence a teacher is helping a student learn something he or she did not know before the subject was introduced by the teacher. A coach, on the other hand, works with a student who is already familiar with the subject, sometimes at an expert level, and whose goal is the improvement of performance. Performance is, in this case, being defined as the skilled application of knowledge.

So, you have a nice fast ball and two times out of three you can put it over the plate and past the batter. The fourth time, however, when the batter has had a chance to become familiar with your speed and adjust to it, he knocks it out of the park. You need a curve, or a change-up, or a knuckle ball. You need a coach. You know how to throw a ball, now you need to learn how to throw it in a particular way to suit circumstances.

Coaching also goes beyond the physics or the circumstances of applying a skill. Anyone who has watched Tiger Woods struggle lately appreciates this. Anyone who has watched a basketball player who can hit from anyplace on the court while flying through the air, or falling, and with a larger man draped over him and then watched the same player have difficulty hitting the basket unmolested from the free throw line, appreciates the role of the mental state of the player in performance. Sometimes the mental state of the performer is the greatest impediment to skilled performance. And sometimes the greatest advantage a competitor can have is affecting the mental state of an opponent.

In an earlier article I spoke of the advantage David gained over Goliath by seeming to be hopelessly overmatched – a boy against a giant, a warrior against a shepherd. Joe Namath used the same bravado against the Baltimore Colts in the Super Bowl. A young Cassius Clay used it against Sonny Liston. And while the real weapons were speed and novel weaponry they were complemented by an inexplicable confidence that befuddled the opponent. They messed with their opponent's minds and they reinforced their own confidence.

On the other hand, confidence itself can be the obstacle. The Romans had a useful custom of reminding their successful generals that despite their victories and the accolades and honors heaped on them, that they were just men like any other. When a general returned to Rome, at the head of his army, victorious in battle, nearly deafened by the cheers of his fellow citizens, a single slave would continually whisper in the general's ear, "Memento homo," "Remember you are only a man." Not a bad custom and one that sits comfortably next to the sign Harry Truman kept on his desk in the White House that said, "The buck stops here."