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CHRIS DAVIS: Welcome to the Career and Academic Research Center Podcast. I am your host, Chris Davis, associate director of the Career and Academic Research Center, or CARC, as it's known here at the Harvard Extension School. And I am very pleased to have with me today James Laporta in a studio right in the heart of Harvard Square. Today we're going to have a really wonderful conversation about the benefits of coaching.

So this is something that I've thought about for a while. We have a student population that is very much-- the adult nontraditional students are far along in their professional careers. They are mid or senior level managers. And there's a lot of talk in the business world and a lot of organizations about coaching at the individual level, at the organizational level. So for folks who have heard of it at that level, coaching, and they don't really know much more about it than that-- and I have to confess that I probably am in that category too.

I wanted to talk to someone who is very much an expert and adept at this field, who knows a lot about it, who has worked as a coach, who has had a lot of experience coaching in various settings. But I wanted to invite him, and hopefully, he'll give us a little bit about his background, and talk to him about the benefits of coaching. So James, thank you so much for being here today.

JAMES LOPATA: Thank you for having me.

CHRIS DAVIS: Mm-hmm.

JAMES LOPATA: Very excited to talk about one of my favorite topics.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yes. So if you could tell us about your background, that would be great.

JAMES LOPATA: So I've been coaching for about six or seven years now. And I do a lot of coaching, everything from entrepreneurial. I'm an official business coach for the City of Boston. I'm a mentor, judge with MassChallenge. I also work with executives at places like Tesla, Facebook, GE, across the board.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, that leads me into what I was going to ask you next. So there are different kinds of coaching, as you mentioned. There's a business coaching or an organization enterprise wide coaching and also individual coaching. Can you give a little summary or an overview or, I guess, an example of what either of those kinds of coaching-- what that entails?

JAMES LOPATA: Yeah. So great question. So there's all different ways of categorizing coaching. I've seen lists of 15 different types of coaching, 25 different types of coaching. So let me get back to the essence of coaching and how I think it can help people listening here. One of the roots of coaching actually came from Harvard. It was a guy Tim Gallwey, who-- he has a book out called, *The Inner Game of Tennis*.

And about 30 years ago, hopefully, back in the '70s now, he was teaching tennis here at Harvard. And the traditional way of teaching tennis was technique, and he began teaching something called the inner game of tennis, which is rather than showing people how to hold the racket. He would have them hold the racket and ask them things like, how does the racket feel? What's your experience when you finished that swing?

And began to ask some questions, and this is a fundamental part of coaching, is asking questions to help people reveal their own inner game. So he began asking questions, and so that became very effective. His class became very popular, and he began teaching things like the inner game of golf, the other game of all sorts of other things. But here's the thing about coaching. So at one point, his inner game of tennis class became so popular that he didn't have enough instructors for it.

So what he did was, he asked the inner game of golf teachers to teach the tennis classes. And the question I ask in a lot of my workshops is, OK, so at the end of that class, which students play tennis better? The ones that have the tennis teachers or the ones that have the golf teachers? And the answer is that, in key respects, the tennis students that had the golf teachers play tennis better. And that's because the golf instructors never picked up the racquet and said, here, just hold it this way. Because if they did that they were showing them the way the instructor should hold it best rather than sticking with the student.

The tennis instructors-- everyone's from-- well, they got lazy and said, oh, just hold it like this. So this is the power of coaching, is that, it's really finding your inner game, which is not anybody else's. It's not your teachers, it's not anyone else's. So I do a lot of work in helping people find the right coach for them. And a lot of the key mistakes that people have in looking for a coach is, they want to find somebody who has the exact same experience background as they do.

And that's not necessarily a bad thing, but the coach's expertise is really helping you find out what you have. And if you get somebody who's got, say, the same management experience or the same industry experience as you, you may end up with the mistake of thinking that their way is better. Whereas another coach is going to help you find the way that's best for you.

My suggestion in terms of coach and types of coaching would be, once you start to look for a coach-- feeling trust with the coach is of primary importance. If you trust your coach then they are going to lead you into the kind of coaching, the type of coaching that will be best for you.

CHRIS DAVIS: What is the distinction between a coach and a mentor?

JAMES LOPATA: Good question. What's the difference between a coach and a mentor? What's the difference between coaching and therapy? What's the difference between coaching and consulting? These are questions that come up all the time. So if you think about it, a mentor brings their own experience. And in the example, or the inner game of tennis stories that I just told you, you don't want them bringing their experience.

In fact, the mentor comes from the-- it was a Greek person called mentor, and the instruction that he was given was to teach the students everything he knew. And so that's what a mentor does. A mentor teaches you everything that they know. But that limits you because you're limited to what your mentor knows. The coach helps you open up the possibilities to find, say, other mentors or other people. So that's the difference between a mentor and a coach.

The difference between a mentor and a consultant or a coach and a consultant is, a consultant-- so the mentor comes with their experience. The consultant comes with their expertise. So they will tell you what to do. The coach, again, helps you reveal your own expertise in a new way. The coach's expertise is really asking the right questions and helping you reframe what you already have and help you open up doors that you didn't know could be open to you. How's that?

CHRIS DAVIS: That's fine, that's fine. So yeah, my next question would be to ask you-- I think a lot of people think of coaching or hear coaching and they think, this is uniquely of a professional development opportunity. And it certainly is that but would you classify it as something more than that or is it certainly depends on the person, their experience, what they're looking to get out of it. I guess I'm trying to come up with hypothetical scenarios or questions that folks have.

I mean, if someone-- I think a lot of people would, perhaps, hear coaching and think, oh this is someone I'm going to talk to. If I want to get a promotion or I want to advance in my field, then that's what I go to a coach for. But there's certainly much more that they can get from a coaching experience, right?

JAMES LOPATA: Yeah. Another way to contrast coaching is with therapy. Coaching comes out of also a positive psychology background. So therapy is a negative psychology background. It's about taking someone who's ill in, some way, and making them healthy. Coaching is about taking somebody who's-- we say performing fine and moving them to better, to optimize.

So it's about health to pick performance. In fact, the inner game of tennis methodology, their formula is that, our level of performance is our potential minus resistance. And so we could be performing well, but there's still resistance, so we want to remove that. A lot of people that I work with are mid career. They're managers, they're new managers, or they're moving up the executive ladder. One of the things that we know is, c-suite loves coaching, but it's at a high price point, and they've got specific terms around that.

One of the things that we're looking at is how-- and they want their lower level managers to start to get into coaching. And part of it is advancement. Part of it is that, the executives know that it's about everything. It's about who you are. So I do some executive, like senior level c-suite coaching as well. And we have this idea-- as you said, the coaching is behavioral, like I want to increase my ability to communicate better.

I want to handle difficult conversations. I need some time management. OK. Invariably, as we begin to work through those things in the c-suite, marriage issues come up, personal things. Because All of this affects our performance. So if you remember, its potential minus resistance, equals performance. So it's whatever's getting in the way of you reaching your potential. And part of your potential is work as you say, but part of it is not.

So we'd like to talk about-- there's a whole field in coaching called ontological coaching, who you are. Who you are determines how you do things. How you do things determines what you get in life. And so while there are a lot of modes of coaching-- if you want to talk about types of coaching, it will focus on tactical goal setting. There's others that will focus on behavioral, so how do I change my communication behaviors?

All of them ultimately get to a sense of who am I, and who do I want to be. And so who I am, again, will have a broader effect on my overall life than anything else. And so all roads lead back to who you are, and who you are changing, and how we can decrease the resistance to that. So a couple of examples. So I was just on a coaching call this morning with a with an executive at a large international company. He came to me about a year ago, and he was taking on a whole new responsibility. When we talk about resistance we talk about getting in our own way.

So there's a lot of things that I could provide you-- and a coach can provide behavioral assessments. They can provide all sorts of tools time, management tools. But ultimately, what was getting in his way was his inability to talk to his boss about, OK, I need to know-- mhm, you need to be a little more assertive in asking what's holding him back. He was recently passed over from being promoted. And part of what's at issue is that, he's afraid to ask what's really going on.

And this morning session was incredible because he was just so excited because the session before we had about a month ago, it was like-- I kept asking him questions. What's getting in the way? What's getting in the way? And he's like, well, I really need to talk to my boss. I'm like, OK, so what's it going to take? And while we were on the call, he reached out to his boss and they had the conversation. And it's opened up a whole realm of possibilities. He was so excited and this is just him getting out of his own way.

CHRIS DAVIS: Right

JAMES LOPATA: That's one way the coaching works. I do coaching for another large company. I work with a couple of leaders who are in their accelerated leadership development program. They already have coaches internally, and they're getting-- so here's another way to contextualize coaching, is in large corporations or in many businesses. You get training. You get development. You even get some internal coaches. They have mentors, like this company has all these resources.

And one of the things that was identified for both of these people was to help them with their executive presence. Now what's interesting is that, they have an internal coach. They actually are taking a class on executive presence. They've called an outside coach to work with their executive presence. Because even though they're getting the larger coaching, and even though they're getting the training, both of them are approaching executive presence from two different sides.

One tells stories he's great in front of an audience, but he can't get to the point. The other is really good with the bullets and the information but can't connect emotionally with the audience. They're getting the same training. And what I do as a coach is, I help them adapt that training to their particular situation. Because what happens is, part of the resistance to getting to peak performance is that, we get inundated with so many great ideas and we don't know how to sort them down to what's effective for us.

CHRIS DAVIS: Mm-hmm.

JAMES LOPATA: One example I use is, Tom Brady's diet book came out recently. Everyone gets excited about his diet. What does Tom Brady eat? Most nutrition experts say, don't follow his advice. Why? Because that's his inner game, that's his diet. So what the coach does is, it helps you find the right methods for you. We have all these studies that show certain amount of things are good for a certain amount of people. But the fact is, no diet is good for everybody.

And so what the coach does is, it helps you ask the right questions to find the right place for you. One of the great aspects of coaching is, you're in an environment built a lot on confidentiality. And so you're in a confidential environment and you can explore. I'm coaching, actually, a really talented young woman right now who's very frustrated. Her skills are not recognized as much as you would like, and I get this a lot. And you get these in-- and she's looked on Glassdoor and realized that other people have had similar issues.

And so one of the things we really want to explore-- I like to say there are two parts to this. So living in your genius is great. But you can have a great seed in the wrong soil. It ain't going to grow. Right. So put a cactus in a rainforest, it ain't going to grow. So part of it is finding the right soil for you. In some places you can help nourish that soil. And sometimes you-- just the right places, the right time and place for you at certain points. But this is where-- in the confidentiality of a coaching situation you get that time and space to have somebody else to reflect back to you what's going on.

What coaching has done for me, because I've had a coach for a long, long time now long before I became coach, it helps you move more quickly to that because you begin to have questions, well, should I really stick it out here or not? And then you've got this person who you can reflect it back to. I like to say sometimes coaching is about helping you discern who you are versus who you've been conditioned to be. Because our external surroundings will tell us, wow, you're really good at PowerPoint.

So you should be doing more PowerPoint. You hate doing PowerPoint, but you begin to think, well, maybe I do like it because everybody thinks I'm good at it. In a coaching situation, you can begin to explore, and I can ask, so how much do you really enjoy doing that? You're like, well, people loved what I did. I say, OK, OK, people loved what you did. Did you love it? And then, OK. So what are some other possibilities? What are the things that you really do love and help you move more quickly to the things that energize you?

CHRIS DAVIS: I didn't realize that there were relationships that coaches had with the folks that they're working with that are sustained over many years.

JAMES LOPATA: Yes. And this is actually a trend. Traditional coaching, c-suite coaching, has often been six, nine month, 12 month packages, where somebody gets into a position, and they're really gruff, and they-- everybody thinks they're outstanding performer, but if they can just get their communication skills so they're not as defensive, that can be very behavioral. That's a classic coaching, behavioral change package.

What we're finding is that, coaching itself becomes this powerful-- sometimes we use the term, trusted advisor, but it's more than that because I'm not advising you, but it's a trusted space. And so I've had people work with me, I mean, several people now, for many, many years. I've been coaching for seven or eight years and many of them have been with me. I've got probably about four or five clients who've been with me from the start.

And you go in and out of it. There are times when it's really intense and we're talking every week, and then there are times when we don't talk for a few months. But the advantage of having somebody like that over time is that, they get to know you. And so when you do hit a career crisis again you call them up, and it's like, OK, we've been here before. So what's the new learning? What's different? And it's, again, that space to help them reflect a new path. And I find that the more millennials really appreciate that.

And I think the c-suite understands that more now too because corporations are throwing more training. They want the millennials. Millennials are the largest segment of the management in corporate world right now. And c-suite wants to keep throwing in all this training. And what they're finding is that, the coaching helps, again, that space to help them figure out how to apply their training to their specific situation.

And so it does begin this ongoing process. It's not specific behavior, which people identify in the c-suite, because these are very unformed in a lot of ways-- managers. And so it's, whatever's coming up. And the coach can help navigate and help them navigate so then the employee can go back to their boss or the HR person and say, you know what, I'm struggling with these areas, and maybe rather than this course, I might be better off with this one. So you begin to cocreate the learning and development process for the employee.

CHRIS DAVIS: Do you find generational differences in how people absorb coaching, or how open to it they are, or what they seek to get from it?

JAMES LOPATA: I try to avoid generalizing too much. But let me answer this in a different way.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yeah.

JAMES LOPATA: Let me go back to the game of tennis. It doesn't matter what the generalizations are. It's about what you bring and what's important for you. And one of the things that I want to put out there for anyone at any level is-- because I do a lot of-- at AceUp, where I do a lot of coaching, we provide people the opportunity to try a few different coaches. So we get a lot of complimentary. Let's see if we're a good fit calls of that sort.

And so people don't know exactly what coaching is. So that's why I'm glad that you're having this. So some of the things that-- it doesn't matter what level you're at. , People think, well the coach is going to tell me what to do. Or, the coach is going to bring some methods or provide reading. Or, the coach is going to give me their experience. Or, the coach is going to hold me accountable.

So those are things that a coach can do, but that's not where you're going to get your most benefit from coaching. And so I would encourage people-- when people think about coaching, think about it at a much higher level. It's this weird thing like, how can somebody help me if all they're really doing is asking questions and listening? It's an extraordinarily powerful process. I'm not going to bring my-- I mean, I may bring my expertise, but that's not what's going to be important to you.

In fact, Google's research when they were-- they did a bunch of research about what makes a great boss. And they came up with eight key things. And the lowest one on the list was your expertise. Your expertise is the least important thing as a manager. That's my least important thing that I have to offer as a coach.

Yeah, I've worked on Wall Street. Yeah, I've worked in the entrepreneurial community. Yeah, That's the least important thing in our relationship, coach to coachee. The number one attribute that Google found that makes a great manager is to be a good coach. That's literally what it was. , And to be a good coach means to help people find again, what's important to them.

And so I encourage people, if you want to get the most benefit out of coaching-- and it is an extraordinary-- there's a reason why this has arisen in the past few decades as a new profession-- is because it's extraordinarily powerful. And it takes that training. It takes that knowledge. It takes your mentors. It takes your boss. It takes all that.

And it brings it into this confidential space where you can sort it out and say, oh, what's really going to work for me? With somebody who has no stakeholder in terms of your results for your performance. Whether your marriage is going to survive or not or-- my only goal is to help you feel like you're in your genius, to find the right place for you to blossom.

To find a right way for you to blossom. That's my only job, is, to help you do that. And so we remove all that other clutter. And so that's what I would encourage. The best benefit you're going to get out of coaching is finding a coach who you feel you can trust to come into that space and bring whatever. And don't expect-- and don't even want them to bring their expertise.

They're going to bring it, but that's the least important part. So that's what I would say about what people come with coaching. It's a very different field, it's very new, so people don't understand it. But really try to open your space to try something really new.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well I can't imagine a more thorough yet concise overview to what coaching is and how it can benefit people. So James, thank you so much. I appreciate your time. Thank you so much for joining us today.

JAMES LOPATA: I really appreciate you asking me to come in and talk about this.

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CHRIS DAVIS: You have listened to the podcast. Now This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School, and I hope you will join us again.

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