EXECUTIVE COACHING
Using an Advanced Method of Interpreting LIFO® Survey Results

by Allan Katcher and Ian Tibbles

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The LIFO® Method can be a powerful tool to enhance coaching sessions with executives, managers, team leaders, and individuals who want to improve their interpersonal effectiveness. To realize the full possibilities, the coach needs to use the principles of a client-centered approach, remembering that the client is the expert on him/herself. This article will discuss how to:

- Establish the coaching contract with the client.
- Establish rapport with the client.
- Use the LIFO® method to identify the appropriate coaching style.
- Use the Intention, Behavior and Impact information from the LIFO® Survey to provide insights into the congruence of the client's communication.

Each of these aspects is described in more detail below, following a general overview.

Overview

The LIFO® profiles provide a lot of information that usually amaze people. We are often accused of obtaining input from others who know the person or from personnel files. Our reply is that this is simply the result of taking information "volunteered" by the person who completed the survey -- a rearrangement of that information to produce a different and more powerful understanding of oneself.

Usually, we use the results and the brief interpretations gained from lectures and references as tools for discussing how one impacts others and for stimulating comments about personal reactions and experiences -- a lead to planning improvements in future relationships.

Yet, we also know that on a one-one coaching basis, understandings can be obtained that are surprisingly deep and insightful -- that go far beyond the first layers of interpretation we usually provide from an "expert" point of view to reveal underlying patterns of thought and feeling.

Those who can use the LIFO® Method best in coaching seem to be able to tap their associations and feelings, ride with them as hypotheses and test them against the consistencies of existing behavior patterns. A conversation with a physician friend (D. Osterweil) revealed that skilled medical diagnosticians also function in this manner. At this point, we are not talking about validity (which might be the concern from an expert interpretive viewpoint) but a process of thinking that has, as its end, validation by the person completing the survey. The LIFO® theory does provide a fairly accurate representation but it is the dialogue between the "interpreter" and the person that generates the insights and understandings that are so valuable for personal and professional development (the heart of the LIFO® Method!).

In the LIFO® interpretation process, especially in the art of assessing the import of Intention, Behavior and Impact subtotals, this is especially critical. The differences that are used are small, sometimes hard to defend as significant. The patterns, however, are most informative.
The Coaching Contract

The LIFO® method is designed to be non-threatening. The results of the survey provide a language for discussing the clients’ orientation in normal and stress/conflict situations, the potential strengths and weaknesses of these preferences, and insights into how their chosen orientations will interact with similar and different orientations. Normally the coach will discuss these issues with the client, give them a LIFO® workbook, and suggest some areas they may work on. There are, however, a number of other possibilities to explore if the contract is established differently.

It is very important to state the contract clearly and explicitly because the advanced interpretation method is client-oriented and relies on the full commitment of the client to the process.

The crucial aspects of the contract with the client are to establish that:

- They are the experts on themselves and the results of the survey are a starting point for discussion.
- To remind the client that there are no right or wrong approaches and that they can choose to accept or reject the interpretations which are made. (This ensures the process is non-threatening.)
- Because they are the experts on themselves, the coach will use the information contained in the survey to develop hypotheses about their behavior which can be discussed and evaluated by the client (i.e., following a rigorous client-centered approach).
- The discussion with the client is used to access additional, historical, situational, and contextual data which will assist the coach in understanding the strategies which the client used and identifying potential development opportunities.
- Those hypotheses which are perceived to be relevant and helpful following discussion will be added to the profile information to assist the client in future self-development work.
- All aspects of the coaching session will remain confidential.

Establishing Rapport With The Client

The coach should use his/her own LIFO® profile and that of his/her client to diagnose the correct approach to establishing rapport. It is essential to identify both the appropriate coaching environment for the client and, given their own preferred orientations, how appropriately to adapt their own approach so that the coaching style does not appear artificial nor does it involve adopting behaviors which the coach will find difficult to use effectively.

There are essentially 3 elements in establishing rapport:

- Pacing
- Matching
- Leading

Each of these can be better understood by using the available data on both the coach and the client from the LIFO® survey. For example coaches with a strong preference for the Controlling Taking orientation, working with clients with a strong preference for the Conserving Holding orientation, may need to slow down the pace of the discussion, take one issue at a time, and provide explanations for each point that they make. However, they should not ignore their own preferences by adopting the Conserving Holding completely as this will appear artificial and lead them to becoming frustrated and impatient.

Matching (Bridging) means adopting behavioral approaches which, while in no way seeking to mimic the client's behaviors (as this can appear rude), give a sense of comfort and security. Using the same example described above, the coach might, for example, seek to establish a serious, thoughtful climate for discussion.
using rational arguments backed by example and employing silences to allow the client to think through the issues under discussion before moving to the next point.

Establishing a clear contract and using the LIFO® information to establish rapport will provide the foundation for using the advanced interpretation methods. Without achieving these first two steps, the climate will not exist to move to step three, generating hypotheses to drive the coaching session.

**The Advanced Interpretation Method**

The method described below may differ significantly from that taught in LIFO® training programs in some countries. It should not be interpreted as an alternate to the normal method of interpretation but rather as an additional approach which may be helpful and relevant in some coaching situations. We have found that many of those trained in interpreting LIFO® profiles, in their anxiety to “follow the rules correctly,” fail to use their own knowledge and experience in ways that they should use them in other situations and, more importantly, they fail to use the knowledge that the client has of him/herself.

To explain the method we will first review the use of information from the Intention-Behavior and Impact subtotals:

The original LIFO® work was heavily influenced by the writings of Carl Rogers. One particular aspect dealt with communication congruency (the match between what one desires, how one behaves and how one is received by others). The more congruent the relationship between intention and behavior, the more likely one will be understood as intended. Within the structure of the LIFO® Survey, a test of this model was included, since a grouping of items was made according to whether they reflected a person's intention, behavior, or perceived impact on others.

The tabulation page of the LIFO® Survey contains eight subtotals, four for the favorable conditions and four for unfavorable ones, representing the relative preference for each LIFO® orientation or style:

- Supporting Giving
- Controlling Taking
- Conserving Holding
- Adapting Dealing

There are three subtotals that are added to yield the total for each style. Thus, one's Supporting Giving total under favorable conditions, for one person, may be 24, composed of three subtotals that are 8, 8 and 8 (Person A). Another with the same total could have subtotals of 11, 10 and 3 (Person “B”).

- The first subtotal (row) represents an aspect of behavior related to intentions (what the person desires or wants to do)
- The second subtotal refers to actual behavior (what the person sees him/herself as doing).
- The third subtotal indicates impact (how the client believes others see the behavior).

In the above examples, although the totals are equal, the interpretation would be very different.

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When all of the subtotals are equal (roughly, less that three points apart), the theory suggests that communications are fairly congruent (the case of Person A). As a result, it is easy to understand the person
and he/she is able to achieve what is desired (communications are being "managed" effectively). Discrepancies greater than that magnitude raise questions about factors that affect communications.

**Incongruent Communication**

The LIFO® Survey Supporting Giving subtotals for Person "B" are as follows:

- Intention 11
- Behavior 10
- Impact 3

Despite strong intentions to provide help, assistance, or to emphasize ideals, Person B fails to carry it through and is likely not to be seen as "helpful," "supportive," or desiring to be idealistic. What could be happening to produce this effect? The person may feel strongly interested in being helpful and feel he/she is providing lots of evidence in behavior, yet others fail to see it. Several possibilities exist:

- The person may be using behavior that is idiosyncratic -- not the kind of behavior that others associate with being helpful (for example, offering a lot of unsolicited advice).
- Behavior may be so dominated by another dimension that it is masked. Think how advice might be interpreted by someone whose Controlling Taking emphasis was a 34!.
- Behavior may be masked by an overly Conserving Holding approach.
- Alternatively, one may wonder if this dimension is really perceived by the person as valuable despite reliance on its values. Perhaps, it signifies not a strength but a weakness, something to be ashamed of.

There are many leads that can be explored, some of which will be eliminated as we look for patterns and relationships in other dimensions. Trust the hypothesizing -- it may not be valid, but during dialogue it will often lead to "truth."

Thus the same "Style" total can take on different meanings depending upon the intention-behavior-impact components. Such information can be quite valuable in exploring the impact of a persona’s style with colleagues, supervisors, employees, families, and friends. At a later point we will discuss a model for such discussions that also provides a framework for managing change.

Patterns can be observed across the matrix of subtotals on the tabulation page of the LIFO® Survey. For example:

**Subject "C"**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorable Conditions</th>
<th>Unfavorable Conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SG  CT  CH  AD</td>
<td>SG  CT  CH  AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  3  5  6</td>
<td>5  12  7  6</td>
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<td>8  7  8  9</td>
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<td>8  10  7  5</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>21  30  21  19</strong></td>
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Subject "D"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Favorable Conditions</th>
<th>Unfavorable Conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SG</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>CH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These two profiles have apparently similar patterns under favorable conditions, save for their Adapting Dealing totals under unfavorable conditions. A detailed analysis of the subtotals suggests ways in which the quality of their behavior is surprisingly different.

In all of the instances of C's favorable results, the intention subtotals are lower than the behavior and impact subtotals. It is as if C strives hard to behave in ways felt to be acceptable by others or required by roles. These are not necessarily behavior patterns that provide satisfactions and may even diminish to C the sense of accomplishment achieved by the impacts (almost giving rise to a feeling of having fooled or manipulated others). The fact that the Controlling Taking intention subtotal is so high under unfavorable conditions and that the general performance is more congruent under these circumstances may suggest further verification of this hypothesis (a defensive need to influence others regardless of circumstances--further a lack of comfort with self or willingness to trust feelings and wishes).

In D's case it seems that intentions do not readily get translated into desired impacts despite perceived correlation with behaviors. For this individual, there is either a lack of skill or a failure to perceive how others expect communications in the various dimensions. Save for the Controlling Taking area, the same thing is true under unfavorable conditions. One is tempted to hypothesize an over-concern for other's approval and affection--that there is a general inhibition of response, even a conversion into ineffective behavior that reflects a serious lack of confidence. Thus the Controlling Taking behavior is temporized into careful and diplomatic statements of position as contrasted to C's more forceful and dominant assertiveness under the same conditions.

In the movie Mass Appeal (1984, directed by Glenn Jordan), the behavior of the protagonist and his relationship with the key supporting-cast member demonstrates another facet. In the film, Father Flaherty is an apparently successful priest with a large following, who has developed a humorous and pleasant style that highlights a charming Adapting Dealing pattern of behavior. Through a series of circumstances he takes on the mentoring of a divinity student who is a thorn to his instructors in the seminary. The student has a tendency to antagonize people by intense confrontations of any behavior that seems inconsistent with the ideals he feels underlie the nature of religious experience. In one scene he critically accuses Father Flaherty of hypocrisy in front of the father's congregation! Despite the conflict, a bond develops between the two and the excessive Adapting Dealing behavior of Father Flaherty which is sometimes manipulative, overly funny, and even insincere, changes to a more congruent use of empathy along with Supporting Giving sincerity.

Father Flaherty spends a good deal of his effort in establishing a friendly and sociable manner that will influence people to like him and approve of what he does. He is gifted in reading feelings and expectations so it is easy for him to know what to say to make each person feel special and recognized. He participates actively in church events and responds readily to requests for need. A ready humor lightens tensions and eases his path in getting things done. He generally handles conflict by avoiding it, even to the extent of making false statements (white lies) to extricate himself from blame or prevent any tarnishing of the image of a "beloved priest." While willing to offer a dissenting opinion to his bishop, he is careful to state it as tenuously as possible--to resist but also back away if pressed. He seeks to do what will be popular not necessarily what is always right. He does not lead by example but by finding the right quotes to mouth and by his extraordinary personal skills.
The student, Mark, is an ardent young man who has come to the church by conquering inner needs and dedicating his life to what he believes. Honesty above all is a life principle and he feels church leaders should be what they urge others to be -- to serve as a shining example (a Christ reincarnated). Thus he counters sham, pretense, and deceit with ridicule, criticism and opposition. He constantly challenges others to offer reasons for their positions and refuses to accept shibboleth statements as defense. His is not a diplomatic accommodation to a search for the ideal. He is also genuinely willing to listen, to hear the feelings and to examine what needs to be done even though he may not be able to do it himself. However, he feels he should be able to do it. Although he goes along with the priest’s recommendations on how to deliver a successful sermon, it comes across without conviction because in the end it simply becomes another criticism of behavior he despises and a rejection of the congregation’s feelings and desires.

In a role playing exercise, the father attempts to develop the art of small talk by making statements to which Mark is supposed to respond with light remarks. However, he senses that some of those statements are projections of the Father’s reality and proceeds to provide empathetic remarks which result in the Father revealing some deep personal feelings that end in sobbing. One sees then a struggle to be more whole, to become more coherent with the drives that brought him to the priesthood, to become a more Supporting Giving person than an excessively Adapting Dealing one.

To explain how the advanced interpretation method can be applied in this case, we will use a hypothetical profile of Father Flattery as follows:

**Father Flaherty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorable Conditions</th>
<th>Unfavorable Conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SG CT CH AD</td>
<td>SG CT CH AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 8 6 7</td>
<td>9 9 5 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 7 5 11</td>
<td>7 8 6 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 7 5 12</td>
<td>4 6 4 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong> 23 22 16 29</td>
<td><strong>20 23 15 32</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Student (Mark)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorable Conditions</th>
<th>Unfavorable Conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SG CT CH AD</td>
<td>SG CT CH AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 7 7 6</td>
<td>10 10 7 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 10 6 4</td>
<td>8 11 15 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 11 5 4</td>
<td>7 12 6 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong> 30 28 18 14</td>
<td><strong>25 33 18 14</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**The Process**

We have already seen from the explanation above how much useful information can be adduced using the normal interpretation process. This process is a vertical analysis which has the following steps:

**Step 1**

Review the middle line results (Totals for Favorable Conditions and Totals for Unfavorable Conditions) establishing:

- Preferred orientation
- Back-up orientation
- Least Preferred orientation

**Step 2**

Follow the same process with the bottom line totals to establish the client's orientations in conflict/stress situations.

**Step 3**

Review the Intention, Behavior, and Impact subtotals for each orientation in favorable and unfavorable conditions to provide further explanation of the extent to which the summary total expresses a balance between the three and, where there are significant differences, explore these as discussed in the example above.

The advanced LIFO® Interpretation Method has 3 additional steps and a significantly different method for using the data generated in all of the steps.

**Step 4**

Compare the movement in subtotals between favorable and unfavorable conditions vertically. In Father Flaherty's case the subtotal for Supporting Giving goes down by three points and yet, while the intention is 2 points lower in unfavorable circumstances, the behavior subtotal is 2 points higher and the impact subtotal is 2 point lower.

What might this information be telling the coach? Clearly, we cannot know without further information. One way of getting that information is to adopt a different form of analysis which we describe as "intuitive processing", i.e. the coach allowing his/her mind to range over the possible explanations of the data, using their own prior experience to generate hypothetical explanation to put to the expert (the client). This widens the scope of coach-client dialogue to enable the client to explore possible insights into their behavior, accessing all situational, contextual, and self-awareness data which the coach does not possess.

However, there are 2 other steps which will enable the coach to generate more insightful and potentially more helpful analyses. These steps are described under one heading as they involve the same process of analysis for favorable and unfavorable conditions.

**Steps 5 and 6**

If the coach reviews the data on intention, behavior and impact laterally as well as vertically, it enables a completely new dimension of analysis to provide a different range of insights. To take the example of Father Flaherty, let us suppose we could hold a coaching session with him, using this lateral form of analysis -- what might it add to the interpretation?

In normal circumstances Father Flaherty has a Supporting Giving intention subtotal of 11 but a Supporting Giving behavior subtotal of 5. Yet his Adapting Dealing intention subtotal is 7 and his Adapting Dealing
behavior subtotal is 11. What might this suggest? In the normal analysis we might explore the failure to follow-through the Supporting Giving intention with Supporting Giving behavior as an explanation for the lower Supporting Giving impact than intended. However if an 11 Supporting Giving intention is linked to an 11 Adapting Dealing behavior, other possibilities suggest themselves, e.g.:

- Is there a situational constraint preventing Supporting Giving behavior from being used?
- Is Father Flaherty using Adapting Dealing behavior strategies to achieve a Supporting Giving intention?
- Is Father Flaherty confusing Supporting Giving and Adapting Dealing strategies and therefore achieving an unintentionally high Adapting Dealing impact which frustrates his intentions?

The coach does not have to be correct in his/her analysis as the expert is there -- the client! The analysis must however be interesting, relevant and appropriately presented to enable the client to explore it productively.

Using this form of analysis enables a number of potential areas to be explored with Father Flaherty. For example, in unfavorable conditions is the diminished impact of Supporting Giving, Controlling Taking, and Conserving Holding intentions the result of an over emphasis on Adapting Dealing strategies?

**Conclusions**

From our research we have found:

- Intentions in one orientation may be pursued using behavioral strategies from a different orientation. For example, a client with a strong wish to be in control may use a Supporting Giving behavioral strategy to achieve control. The rationale for this behavior in one example was that the client had moved to a new job recently and needed to spend time working alongside his new team to understand them better as people and to gain information about what they did. The impact was however predominantly controlling because he was perceived to be using the information to enable him to manage the team more effectively. Generating the hypothesis for discussion enabled the coach to access the situational and contextual variables which were causing the client to adopt this strategy.

- High levels of discrepancy between intention and behavior (3 or more points difference) are often explained by:
  - Role
  - Constraints of the job
  - Constraints of the domestic situation
  - Recent experience of major change - move of job/house, marriage/divorce, illness, etc.

- Low impact subtotals often result from:
  - Ineffective behavioral strategies
  - Conflicting intention and behavior, e.g. a high wish to be controlling being pursued by an excessive use of Adapting Dealing strategies
  - Internal conflict in the client, e.g. high intentions to be both Supporting Giving and Controlling Taking.

If the approach is explained to the client, they will be able to generate hypotheses of their own to be discussed with the coach.
Conclusion

The principles of the LIFO® Method...

- a client-centered approach
- each style being a potential strength
- focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses

...enable the coach to establish a relationship with the client which enables a much deeper and more insightful exploration of the clients behavioral strategies because it is not constrained by the limitations of the available data - it is an exploration that accesses the self-knowledge of the client and the experience and knowledge of the coach.