Coaching stakeholders involved in external program evaluations

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INTRODUCTION

Even for higher education institutions (HEIs) experienced with accreditation evaluations, they remain a key moment with high stakes. In Flanders, accreditation is based on periodic program evaluations by an external body. A positive advice by a commission of external experts, appointed by a government organization, is a necessary condition for further accreditation.

Evaluation commissions heavily depend on interviews with stakeholder groups to determine whether applicable standards are met. Time for interviews, however, is exceedingly limited. Getting the intended impression across can be difficult, especially if the stakeholders are not skilled speakers. Moreover, stakeholders' perceptions may be misinformed. Coaching stakeholders to communicate efficiently has accordingly become crucial for HEIs to receive an accurate evaluation.

This paper describes an approach to coaching based on scientific insights from the fields of social psychology and communication. The approach was adopted for an engineering program located at six campuses, to be visited within the time constraints of four days, including fourteen group interviews with a total of 150 individuals. The subsequent steps in the coaching process are described with reference to supporting scientific theories.

1 THE NECESSITY OF COACHING

1.1 Institutional context

Several institutional reasons may presently cause commissions to be excessively careful to warrant a positive advice. The Flemish higher education landscape has undergone considerable changes over the past decade: mergers, extensive budget cuts and the restructuring of education have all had a profound impact on the policy and curricula of higher education programs.

The program to be evaluated has been influenced by many of these changes. At the start of the academic year 2013-2014, the Bachelor of Industrial Sciences organised by five formerly competing HEIs was integrated into the KU Leuven, after going

through a process to strengthen the curriculums academic component. It is now part of the newly founded multicampus Faculty of Engineering Technology, and is to be considered as one program concurrently offered at six locations. In light of budget cuts the commission might question the added value of organizing the program at six campuses. To truly appreciate the program, it is important that both the stakeholders and the commission are aware of hurdles conquered during the academisation and integration processes, of choices made and of future opportunities. These are not always visible to individuals, creating a need for awareness building.

1.2 Individual needs

With time constraints imposed on interviews, impression formation becomes crucial. The stakeholders involved in the interviews have miscellaneous profiles: the dean and vice deans, program directors, campus presidents, teaching staff, students, alumni, educational developers, guidance counsellors, … Few individuals are innately effective communicators, nevertheless. Additionally, personal expectations can influence how an individual acts and what he or she divulges. Students and alumni typically have no experience with accreditation processes. Staff members, on the other hand, may have unpleasant experiences due to former evaluations or may not be conscious of changed guidelines for accreditation procedures.

2   THE DEVELOPED APPROACH

Each HEI typically has its own approach for coaching. Originating from five HEIs, the Faculty of Engineering Technology had the fortune to be able to combine several good practices, based on scientific insights from the fields of social psychology and communication. The result was an approach consisting of four subsequent steps (*Fig. 1*), each with specific goals and target groups. The evaluation commission interviews five categories of stakeholders: 1) management, 2) teaching staff, 3) students, 4) supporting staff, and 5) alumni. Two coaches organised and supported the process from beginning to end: the faculty's vice dean and the quality coordinator.
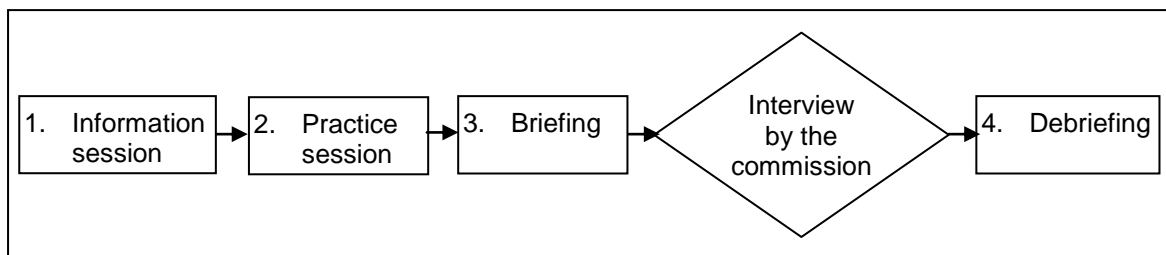

Fig. 1: The subsequent steps in the coaching process.

2.1 Information session

The first step in the coaching process was a general information session aimed at the staff, organised one to two months before the visit by the commission. Different stakeholder groups typically have different guidance needs. It is important for the HEI to provide an adequate response to these needs. Interviews with management and staff typically focus on policy matters, creating a strong need for factual information. Also, as indicated above, there may be a need for awareness building. Coaching typically comes down to strengthening attitudes: bolstering them with facts and opinions, and making them easily retrievable from memory. As Petty & Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model describes, strengthening attitudes in a relatively enduring way depends on both the individual's motivation (e.g. importance) and ability (e.g. knowledge) to do so [1]. Offering information provides one way to help the staff to stand strong against the commission. The type of questions addressed to

students and alumni, on the other hand, can generally be answered based on personal experiences. Yet these groups have other guidance needs, which are addressed in the next steps in the coaching process.

The primary goals of the information session were to inform the staff about the evaluation protocol and to summarize facts, assets, challenges and opportunities of the program. The selected format was a 45-minute presentation by the vice dean followed by Q&A. The session was organised thrice, at different campuses. Additionally, it was recorded for dissemination online together with the program's self-evaluation report. It is advisable to involve all teaching and supporting staff members in this first stage. A group of stakeholders will be selected for each interview, but the commission also has the right to call up additional individuals during their visit if they see a reason to do so.

A presentation by the vice dean and the choice to strongly encourage all staff members to attend the session signal the importance of the evaluation procedure. This will, according to Fishbein & Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action, have a positive effect on the individual's intention to perform related behaviours [2], such as informing oneself and reflecting on attitudes. One has to be careful, though, when emphasizing the importance and possible consequences of the evaluation procedure, to also provide a way of coping with the upcoming threat. Providing an answer through coaching will put the individual at ease and engage him or her to adopt strategies to prepare oneself. Without a fitting answer, the individual might not feel equipped to perform well and as a consequence might avoid thinking of the upcoming event at all so as not to be confronted with fear [3].

The sessions were attended by approximately a hundred staff members.

2.2 Practice session

One to two weeks before the official interviews, a 2,5-hours practice session was organised at each campus. Attendance was required for all stakeholders selected for interviews, with the exception of the alumni. As alumni are restricted in their available time, they were informed through e-mail and attended a more intensive briefing on the day of the official interview instead (see 2.3). Separate practice sessions were organised at each of the five campuses, to resemble the environment of the official interviews, which would also place at the campuses of the affiliated staff and students.

After a brief introduction the participants were split into two groups: students on one hand, and staff members on the other hand. This resulted in two groups of 12-15 participants. Each group was given strips of paper with example questions collected during previous evaluation procedures, and was instructed to sit together in a circle and practice answering these questions. The coaches alternated between the groups, offering tips. After a break, the participants reflected on the questions and on recurring answers during a plenary session moderated by the coaches. The coaches concluded the session by summarizing their impressions and by informing the stakeholders about the next steps in the coaching process.

The practice session's format was chosen to serve several purposes.

- **Inform.** For the students, this was the first step in the coaching process. That is why the session started by emphasizing the importance of the commission's judgement. As with the information session, instilling an awareness of the importance motivates individuals to prepare themselves adequately if a fitting approach is available [3]. The introduction also summarized once more the procedures, standards and guidelines of the commission, as well as the profile

of the commission members. This information helps the stakeholders to determine which information is relevant for the commission.

- **Prepare mentally.** Communication research has shown that warning individuals about an upcoming confrontation with opposing views or criticisms will push individuals to bolster their attitudes [4]. Inoculation theory, which elaborates on this concept of forewarning, states that a small dose of opposing views will push the individual to strengthen the own resistance against further opposing views by generating counterarguments, not just towards the presented criticisms but also making them more resilient against previously unstated comments [5, 6].

- **Practice.** Being able to practice with plausible questions will heighten the individual's perception of how much control he or she has over the upcoming evaluation, again encouraging the stakeholder to prepare oneself [7]. Other coaching formats were considered, like a trial evaluation with a substitute commission. But a more informal approach was chosen as this offers more time to practice and the opportunity for real-time feedback from peers and coaches. Note that the staff and students were split up. The sole presence of their peers and the coaches provided a safe environment where the stakeholders could openly discuss possible ways to tackle a question [3].

- **Confirm and confront perspectives.** The practice session allowed the stakeholders to check their own impressions and experiences against those of their peers. As Asch's famous psychology experiments have demonstrated, individuals have a strong tendency not to want to deviate from their peers when they have to speak out in public. This might even push participants to endorse a misleading statement by peers [8]. Being aware of others' beliefs will give participants the necessary confidence to represent the group when stating an opinion to the commission and to express if this view is personal or shared by others. Simultaneously, discussing topics offers a way to correct misinformed opinions.

- **Inspire.** Discussing example questions as a group enables the stakeholders to look at the topic at hand from various perspectives. The coaches stimulated the discussion by suggesting additional aspects to consider in their answer or by reframing questions from a different point of view. Attitudes are essentially a network of associations between ideas and opinions. Strong attitudes are characterized by strong associations, making them spring to mind automatically or easily accessible from memory [9]. The process of elaborating on peers' replies adds new components to the network and strengthens associations. These can help the individual to construct a comprehensive answer during the official interview.

- **Improve communication style.** The stakeholders could benefit greatly from an effective communication style: communicators with a powerful speech style [10] and a credible impression [11] have consistently shown to be perceived as more persuasive. The coaches observed the groups and gave both personal and group-related tips on the best way to get a message across under time constraints. Specific attention went to how to build a strong argument, answering to the point, vocabulary, non-verbal communication, … An effective communication style may add to the impression that the communicator is confident and credible. Content matters as well, nevertheless. Credible communicators are perceived as having expertise, trustworthiness, and having the listener's interests at heart [12]. The groups

were encouraged to be critical about the program in their answers to the commission, as research shows that disclosing faults about oneself or one's responsibilities rather than having these revealed by someone else, a strategy known as 'stealing thunder', is an effective method of minimizing the impact of that damaging information by creating an impression of openness and honesty [13].

- **Create a group dynamic.** Evaluation commissions value a shared vision in a stakeholder group. Getting acquainted with others who will make out the own interview group and with their beliefs infuses team building. Spontaneously each member will adopt a role and responsibility, allowing them to complement each other in a group interview. What is more, a positive impression of the stakeholders as individuals or as a group can even influence the commission's feelings and thoughts about the program to be evaluated, a cognitive bias known as the halo effect [14].

- **Involve.** An interactive format was chosen, as Hovland's empirical studies have shown that "an individual's mental reactions to a message play a critical role in the attitude formation process, typically a more important role than the message itself" [15]. This is in accordance with Petty & Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model which identifies several critical components for in-depth cognitive processing, including thought rehearsal, reflection time and attention [1]. In addition to their involvement in the practice session, the stakeholders were encouraged by the coaches to use the remaining week to think about the message they would like to get across to the commission (e.g. what they are proud of), and to try to implement this message into the official interview.

Almost all of the 136 selected staff members and students attended a practice session.

2.3 Last minute briefing

On the day of the official interview, each stakeholder group was asked to arrive half an hour early for a last minute briefing. A total of 14 briefing sessions were organised accordingly. The briefing had two main purposes.

- **Inform.** By this stage, the coaches were able to tell the stakeholders which questions had been asked during previous interviews. This allowed stakeholders to mentally rehearse an answer, thereby making the components of their answer 'top of mind' [9]. Note that the coaches did not instruct the stakeholders on how to answer. On the contrary, they encouraged them to answer as they saw fit, to give a truthful account, and certainly not to try to appease the commission. They emphasized that the stakeholders would not be asked to report about their given answers afterwards, so as not to elicit socially desirable answers. Furthermore, the session allowed a chance to offer additional background information, e.g. own policy compared to that of other HEIs, or e.g. interpretations of charts from the self-evaluation report that were often cited during the interviews by the commission. A dozen hardcopy editions of the self-evaluation report were available for consultation by the stakeholders during the interviews. Lastly, the stakeholders once more had an opportunity for Q&A.

- **Prepare mentally.** The last minute briefing was particularly useful to inform the stakeholders about the commission's strategy. For example, the appointed commission systematically elicited a list of strong and weak points from the students, and subsequently confronted the teaching staff with the reported

weak points. It takes a lot of self-confidence not to adopt an overly defensive attitude against continuous criticism. Yet issues can be viewed from a variety of perspectives, each with specific implications for values or considerations [16]. Framing the commission's approach as a strategy can help stakeholders to understand that the commission actually may approve of the overall program, yet is simply fulfilling its role looking for suggestions for improvement. Similarly, some commission members may have a very argumentative personality. Preparing the stakeholders will help them to adopt a confident communication style.

All selected stakeholders attended the briefing before their official interview.

2.4 Debriefing

The last step in the coaching process was a debriefing with the stakeholder group immediately following the official interview. This session took 10 to 45 minutes, dependent on the stakeholders' needs, and pursued three goals.

- **Catharsis.** Often stakeholders experience a desire to relief tensions and emotions after their interview. The debriefing session created an opportunity for catharsis through reflection with peers or by talking to the coaches.

- **Collect input.** The debriefing session offered the coaches the necessary input for the next briefings about the questions asked, communication style of the commission, atmosphere during the interview, and the stakeholders' overall impression of how it went. As noted higher, no input was collected about the answers given to the commission.

- **Collect feedback.** Lastly, stakeholders were asked for feedback about the developed approach and suggestions for improvement (see Discussion).

All selected stakeholders attended the debriefing after their interview.

3   DISCUSSION

This paper describes an approach to coaching stakeholders involved in group interviews with an external evaluation commission. The stakeholder interviews are only one component of the evaluation procedure: the commission also performs an analysis of documentation delivered by the HEI and visits the facilities. However, it is a component that typically plays a crucial role in the evaluation's outcome, whereas time constraints as well as contextual and personal factors may compromise its reliability.

Coaching can improve the reliability of the interviews by helping stakeholders to communicate a truthful impression. Obviously, coaching can be abused to stage a false, more appealing impression. Yet instructing stakeholders on what to say might equally have an opposite effect, generating resistance and disloyalty from stakeholders and distrust from the commission. As a rule, the coaches never instructed the stakeholders on what to say. They offered suggestions for alternative perspectives or additional components to be considered as part of their answers, yet never more than this. Indeed, the coaches explicitly emphasized that stakeholders were allowed to state their own opinions and that any commission would immediately dismiss a staged answer.

The developed approach can provide helpful guidelines for future evaluations by external organisations as well as for similar challenges. During the debriefings, the coaches collected feedback from the stakeholders and inquired after recommendations. The stakeholders' responses were overwhelmingly positive: the

participants had experienced the coaching process as helpful and advised to repeat the same approach for future evaluations. The majority claimed they did not mind the time spent and emphasized that they were pleased to be guided through the process, stating their insecurities. Even in the days after the commission's visit, the coaches continued to receive positive comments from stakeholders. Many had experienced the evaluation process as a personally rewarding experience or even a boost for team building within the faculty.

4   SUMMARY

The fields of communication and social psychology offer many useful insights to unlock the full potential of evaluation procedures. To the commission, relevant input from an articulate group provides a precondition for a sound judgement. To the HEI, their use may lead to a more accurate evaluation, with useful advice as well as recognition for its strengths and efforts. To an individual, they offer tips to communicate efficiently and to boost their confidence. A sensible approach to coaching accordingly not only offers a way to improve the reliability of evaluation procedures, it can also turn these moments into a positive experience for the HEI and its stakeholders.

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