

Coaching Matters

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Katharine Halpin & Company
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Getting the Most Out of Executive Coaching

When used for the right reasons and with competent practitioners, executive coaching can provide significant and lasting benefits for both individuals and organizations. But like other innovations, coaching can become just another business fad. When not effective, it can cause harm to individuals and organizations and waste large amounts of money.

About 6 out of 10 organizations currently offer coaching or other developmental counseling to managers and executives, according to a survey by Manchester, Inc., a Florida career management firm.

In the past, executive coaching was often used as a means to keep a leader from derailing. The Center for Creative Leadership has found that the primary causes of derailment in executives involves deficits in:

1. handling change,
2. working well with teams, and
3. interpersonal relationships.

Coaching is seen as an effective way of helping an individual improve these so-called "soft-skills."

Recent research has found that typical outcomes of executive coaching include the following:

1. Better management through enhancing an executive's ability to navigate sensitive political issues,
2. Strengthening strategic decision making skills, and
3. Opening a window onto organizational and self exploration

(Hall, Otazo & Hollenbeck, 1999; Pilette & Wingard, 1997).

Finding the right executive coach

Whether coaching services are used to explore deficits in competencies with a person or to expand potential, there remains a challenge in finding and acquiring the right professionals to provide excellent coaching. As a newly emerging profession, there is a lack of standardization of practice. Practitioners come from fields as diverse as psychology, management consulting, training and human resources. Some have never had any coach training *per se*, but have adopted their own personal styles of coaching. Unfortunately, some have simply changed their professional titles and are doing consulting or counseling and calling it "executive coaching."

Organizations seeking to employ executive coaches can turn to consulting firms or independent practitioners. There are advantages and disadvantages with both. Selecting coaches requires that the organization assess for skills, organizational fit and per-



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spectives, a daunting task. Great coaches often come from very eclectic career paths. Two effective questions to ask in interviewing for coaches are:

1. What particular types of clients do you work with effectively?
2. What particular types of clients do you not work with effectively?

There are three essential competencies of the effective coach. They must be interpersonally skilled at coaching and influencing others. This requires an extreme self-awareness, excellent listening and observing skills, empathy, and ability to deliver feedback in a tough yet non-judgmental way. Secondly, they must be highly trustworthy. This becomes particularly important when navigating tricky confidentiality boundaries. Thirdly, good coaches must have a sufficient understanding of business practices and organizational politics to help their clients decipher, understand, and address complex situations.

A recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* (Berglas 2002) laments the fact that too many executive coaches lack training in human psychology. Berglas asserts that some coaching professionals may come from the sports and motivational speaking fields with little background or competency in dealing with the complexities of personalities and behavior. In such cases, the coaching experience can actually be harmful. It could be compared to coaching someone to change seats on the Titanic. Unless the underlying problems are addressed, the ship is still sinking. This article met with controversy and was rejected by a large group of professional coaches because of its failure to recognize the skills of experienced professionals who are not psychologists.

Some principles of the masterful coaching experience

Executive coaching as a profession is in its emergent stages, so that it is impossible for any one person, group, or training school to be able to say they have *the* model for the most effective coaching system. However, experienced practitioners will agree there are some principles and standards that make for a masterful coaching experience.

Mary Beth O'Neill in her book *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart* (Jossey-Bass 2000) suggests the following:

- Keep business results and human processes linked
- Encourage a stronger relationship between the executive and his or her team
- Build the leader's capacities to state positions clearly (backbone) and to stay in strong relationship with the team (heart)
- Create real time feedback opportunities

Linking Coaching To Business Results

There are times when coaching does not work. To be optimally effective, coaching must be well managed and aligned with other organizational goals and processes. Many errors can be avoided when the sponsor of the coaching program recog-

nizes this need for organizational and business strategy alignment.

Coaching must be linked with business strategy, goals and outcomes for the organization. However personally important the work becomes between the executive and coach, there must be alignment to business outcomes and organizational success. Otherwise, you are offering a personal perk for the executive and run the risk of no outcome or even a negative outcome for the organization.

Although coaching goes on behind closed doors, it should not happen in a vacuum, ignoring the system within which the individual operates. No amount of individual coaching will improve a situation that has its antecedents in organizational problems. Coaching a person to relate better with team members will do no good when there is a boss who undermines the person's authority. What may originally look like an executive needing coaching for team work may actually be an organizational problem masquerading as an individual issue. For example, an executive may be hampered by departmental rivalries that limit resources. Such an issue is clearly organizational and calls for interventions beyond the scope of executive coaching at an individual level. Because there are often such complexities in organizational life, there is a necessity for multiple solutions.

Coaching is not a panacea for all that is wrong in an organization. There will always be a need for OD and management tools. Without them there may be individual improvements that lack the ability to link them to the improvement of organizational performance and well-being. Group interventions are still important.

Should coaching be mandatory?

Another reason for failure in coaching is a lack of commitment on the part of participants. Many organizations do not address this problem. Although executive coaching may sound like a great idea, many people are not open to getting feedback and coaching. The organization can risk a great deal of time and money when there is little real engagement on the part of participants. There cannot be behavioral change without effort. Effort requires that the individual be motivated. Unless this issue is addressed up front, coaching is wasted. If coaching is set up as a requirement, as in the case of remedial goals, then the outcomes should be behaviorally focused rather than concentrating on mere attendance.

In another example, the individuals say they are interested and motivated, but there is a lack of attendance or a lack of participation in action steps. Lack of time is frequently cited. Worse, there is a failure on the part of the coach to hold the persons accountable.

Linking personal and business goals

Part of the problem may be insufficient time and attention during the contracting phase in defining goals and outcomes for the coaching relationship. Surprisingly enough, many executives have trouble defining what they want out of coaching. While

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they may be very clear about their own personal leadership goals, when it comes to linking it to business outcomes, they may have difficulty.

Since executive coaching involves working with executives on their own leadership issues, less experienced coaches can let actual business results get lost in the process. How will the organization benefit if the leader improves his or her abilities to collaborate or to be more decisive? While this may seem obvious, helping the leader to articulate the actual business outcomes is essential.

There are two kinds of goals for leaders to work on in coaching — business goals and personal goals. Getting external results is linked to what the leader has to do differently in order to get business results. The personal goals must follow the external business goals.

It is important to recognize that the goal setting process is not as easy as it may initially appear. Many busy executives have a bias for action and operate in a *fire-ready-aim* mode. It may be necessary for the executive to slow down long enough to establish clear goals. Sometimes a business situation is too ambiguous to be able to clarify what work process or human relationship goals would support achieving the bottom-line result. The coach who persists in inquiring about these specific goals will help an executive toward better focus and effective action.

Moving into action

O'Neill provides a blueprint for moving the executive into the action planning phase of coaching. To be effective, coaching must move beyond merely discussing and gaining an understanding of a dilemma.

- Move the executive from general venting to a specific plan.
- Help the leader identify his or her side of the pattern in the situation.
- Address issues of organizational and role alignment.
- Plan for resistance to the executive's actions.
- Determine whether the coach has a live-action coaching role during the leader's implementation of the plan.

Many coaching programs provide some opportunity for the coach to observe the executive in action. This provides a clearer picture of the complexities of organizational and personality dynamics. Being able to give the executive real-time feedback is seen as a valuable tool when done properly.

Even without this possibility, there are other key opportunities to provide feedback to an executive, providing the coach is acutely aware of the intricacies of communications. It requires that the coach pick up on the interpersonal relating style of the executive and is able to give feedback to him or her regarding what goes on *in the moment*. The dynamics that occur between coach and executive often mirror those that go on with others in the work group. It is this finely tuned ability of the executive coach to observe and to feed back information to the leader that can make for a powerful coaching experience.

Planning for Resistance: the Power of Homeostasis

Leaders can receive help from the executive coaching experience in planning for the inevitable resistance that will occur when executing a new plan. After some initial compliance, things often go back to the way they were before. Kegan and Lahey write about this powerful force of non-change in their book, *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* (Jossey-Bass 2000). They have a term for it: *dynamic equilibrium*.

It can be highly productive to work with a coach to preview outcomes and plan for resistance. Since many leaders are high in optimism, it may be helpful for them to look at things from another perspective. They must also be encouraged to face their own internal resistance as well. When the executive and the coach explore resistance to change in advance, they increase the chance that they will stay the course to push through the resistance.

Maximizing Resources and Coaching

A coaching program that is carefully conceived as a part of the overall organizational strategy will be cost effective. The cost of coaching can be measured against other development options such as seminars, which might involve multiple days and travel expenses. Even so, training and workshop lessons are retained more effectively with the help of a coach. When a situation calls for coaching, the most expensive coach is *no* coach.

One return on investment study on executives from Fortune 1000 companies revealed an average of almost six times the cost of coaching programs, with improvements in productivity, quality, organizational strength, customer service, and shareholder value. They received fewer customer complaints, and were more likely to retain executives who had been coached.

In another study, a coaching program produced a 529% return on investment and significant intangible benefits to the business. Including the financial benefits from employee retention boosted the overall ROI to 788%.

When competent professionals are available as executive coaches, leaders can explore their strengths within the context of the organization, work more effectively with their teams, develop leadership skills, inspire others and be more focused and effective. The masterful coach helps link the leader's personal goals with the business strategy of the organization.

Recommended Reading:

Executive Coaching: Practices & Perspectives; Catherine Fitzgerald and Jennifer Garvey Berger, Editors, Davies Black Publishing, 2002.

Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart, A Systems Approach to Engaging Leaders with Their Challenges; Mary Beth O'Neill, Jossey-Bass, 2000.

When Coaching Goes Wrong...

To be optimally effective, the coaching program with executives must be well managed and aligned with other organizational goals and processes. Failure to do so is a primary source of problems. Organizations new to coaching may not be aware of the need to manage and oversee this activity. Even so, there are some factors that may arise no matter what. Having a sponsor or program manager can help deal with these as they occur, limiting damage and wasted resources.

Factors Contributing to Failure and Negative Coaching Outcomes

In Clients

1. Serious psychological problems
2. Serious interpersonal problems
3. Lack of motivation
4. Unrealistic expectations of the coach or the coaching process
5. Lack of follow-through on homework or intervention suggestions

(Richard Kilburg, Failure and Negative Outcomes: The Taboo Topic in Executive Coaching, in *Executive Coaching, Practices and Perspectives*, Catherine Fitzgerald and Jennifer Garvey Berger, Eds., Davies Black Publishing, 2002.)

In the Coach

1. Insufficient empathy for the client
2. Lack of expertise or interest in the client's problems or issues
3. Underestimation of the severity of the client's problems or issues
4. Overreaction to the client
5. Unresolved disagreements with the client about the coaching
6. Poor technique (e.g. inaccurate assessment, lack of clarity on coaching contract, poor selection and/or implementation of methods)

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