As the challenges facing leaders and organizations become more difficult, executive coaching is rapidly gaining popularity. A new way of dealing with today’s challenges, executive coaching is a formal arrangement in which a qualified coach works with a business leader in a series of dynamic, confidential sessions designed to establish and achieve clear goals that will result in improved business effectiveness both for the individual and for the organization. Sessions typically are customized, designed to closely match the executive’s unique business challenges, and are solution focused.

Because executive coaching is a relatively recent phenomenon, there is limited information available on the issues involved in using a coach.

Executive coaching can often be confused with other valuable but different activities. This article is intended to give you a better understanding of whether you need an executive coach, whether you are ready for one, what the characteristics of a good coach are, how to evaluate the qualifications of a prospective coach, what the nature of the coaching relationship is, and what to expect when you use a coach, including what results you should ideally obtain. It also discusses how coaching should relate to an overall development system.

**Do You Need an Executive Coach?**

Executive coaching can often be confused with other valuable but different activities. It is not the same as business consulting, an organizational intervention, or psychological counseling. Executive coaching is different from a long-term mentoring relationship with a trusted business colleague.

If you are considering coaching as an option, here are some questions that will help you distinguish coaching from other activities:

- Do I need help in solving a complicated business problem? If yes, do not hire a coach; hire a business consultant.
- Do I need to discuss a deeply personal matter about my internal sense of well-being? If yes, do not hire a coach; engage a licensed psychologist, psychiatrist, or counselor.
- Do I need to discuss the internal politics of my organization and my career path within it? If yes, do not hire a coach; find a trusted person in your organization who is willing to serve as a mentor to you.
- Do I need to learn and practice a specific new skill set that I lack? If yes, do not hire a coach; find an appropriate skills development course that offers opportunities to practice the new skill set, perhaps using videotaped feedback.
- Do I need to acquire a specific fund of knowledge? If yes, do not hire a coach; get the information from such sources as books, tapes, Web sites, classes, or discussion groups, depending on your preferred learning style, and set aside enough time for studying and internalizing the new information.
- Do I need spiritual, moral, or religious guidance? If yes, do not hire a coach; find a rabbi, minister, priest, or other spiritual counselor to assist you.
- Do I need to evaluate whether I am in the right career and to consider possible options for changing careers or professions? If yes, do not hire a coach; hire an expert in career counseling who can do aptitude and interest testing and serve as an expert during your transition.
- Do I need structured planning and support to develop a new way of leading or managing others? If yes, consider hiring a coach.

**Are You Ready?**

Before engaging a coach, however, you should assess your degree of readiness. Unless you are genuinely motivated right now to work with a coach, don’t do it. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I ready to make a commitment of time, money, and energy in my own development?
- Am I seeking coaching services because I sincerely want to improve or because another stakeholder—for instance, a boss, a peer, or a
family member—wants me to? (Wanting to change for yourself is better than needing to change for others.)

- Is it hard for me—because I am very independent, self-sufficient, and autonomous—to consider hiring a coach?
- Will my company pay for coaching, or will I pay for the sessions privately?
- Do I prefer an internal organizational coach or an external coach?
- Am I humble enough to realize I’m not perfect and can be more effective than I am now?
- Am I likely to deny problems instead of working on them?
- Am I capable of doing a rigorously honest self-appraisal?
- What are the characteristics I believe a coach should have in order to be effective in helping me?

What Constitutes a Good Coach?

CCL has trained and recruited hundreds of coaches over the years, and we have identified what we think are the essential characteristics of a good coach. Ideally, he or she should have these traits:

Knowledge about and experience in business and organizations, both domestic and international, with a background in mentoring, supervision, or business consulting.

Knowledge about and experience in change processes and the dynamics of learning.

Executive presence, which means having a professional style and being articulate and confident.

Strong interpersonal skills, which means being a good listener and having the ability to build rapport and trust, to confront and challenge without alienating people, and to use humor appropriately.

Credibility, which means being authentic as an individual.

Skills and knowledge in assessment methodology, including a familiarity with psychological testing interpretation, which means having the ability to select the appropriate test for a specific situation, a strong aptitude for assessment, and the capacity to synthesize data from multiple sources.

Maturity, which means being stable, self-aware, and willing to continually learn and having the ability to handle stress, crisis situations, uncertainty, and ambiguity.

Clear values, which means showing ethical behavior, sensitivity to confidentiality, and nondiscriminatory attitudes and behavior.

Flexibility, which means having the capability of working with a wide range of leaders.

The ability to work with a team, if necessary.

Well-developed management skills, which means being able to plan, conceptualize, implement, and manage a relationship over time.

A strong educational background, with a master’s degree or higher.

The ability to speak more than one language.

In addition to looking for these specific characteristics, the leader should feel a good sense of chemistry and comfort with the coach.

How Can You Evaluate the Qualifications of a Prospective Coach?

Finding out whether an executive coach is properly educated or qualified to do high-quality work is difficult because there are currently no licensing requirements, certification requirements, or sanctioned, impartial consortium boards that rate the vendors.

You should feel a good sense of chemistry and comfort with the coach.

Executive coaching is at present a completely unregulated field of practice. Anyone who wants to can describe himself or herself as an executive coach. It is to be hoped that in the future it will be easier to identify qualified coaches. In the meantime, be careful when you shop: ask for references and be prepared to ask a lot of questions about the coach’s education, training, business experience, ethical guidelines, fees, confidentiality practices, and continuing education. Also ask about the duration of the contract and who the coach consults for technical advice.

Sometimes you can learn about a coach’s results, experience, and track record by word of mouth in the human resource or business community. Be skeptical of a coach who has great sales skills but who offers little information about his or her education, degrees, and years of experience.

Often, executive coaches have some mix of psychology and business education and experience. You may find that a coach educated in business has a stronger ability to understand business challenges and that a coach educated in psychology has a better understanding of the technology of behavioral change. In truth, both types of coaches need continuing education, so feel free to ask your coach what
he or she does to deepen knowledge of and skills in both psychology and business.

What Is the Nature of the Coaching Relationship?

Once you have engaged a coach, you and the coach need to develop a coaching relationship. Executive coaching acknowledges and builds on the many strengths and gifts of the leader. It works best when it leverages strengths rather than focuses on deficiencies. For example, a coach can leverage the intelligence, skills, and resourcefulness of the leader to enhance the coaching outcome. When the focus is on the positive, coaching also tends to improve the leader’s self-esteem and self-confidence.

There will of course be times when the level of challenge will create temporary discomfort or a sense of awkwardness as the leader tries out new skills.

The coaching relationship needs to dignify the person being coached and to inspire motivation, persistence, and hope during such times. The coach should be able to help the leader stick to the change program when he or she is tempted to give up or revert to old habits. Because changing behavior is hard work, the coach should be able to provide needed support and encouragement during times of regression to old ways. The coach should be an expert on the change process and able to assure the manager that periods of regression are natural and normal during a change program. The focus of coaching work should be on producing a measurable, obvious improvement in the work behavior of the leader on a permanent basis.

What Should You Expect During Coaching?

Coaching sessions most often involve several lengthy initial face-to-face meetings to build a solid, trusting foundation and establish realistic ground rules and expectations. The coach’s initial assessment activities may include a mix of such things as interviewing the leader’s colleagues, unobtrusively observing the leader at work, administering on-line or paper-and-pencil questionnaires, interviewing family members or customers, and reviewing performance appraisals.

Then, over time, coaching sessions will address feeding back the assessment findings, setting goals, planning change strategies, measuring and monitoring progress, and discussing setbacks and obstacles. To increase the convenience of these sessions, they may be conducted via e-mail or through telephone- or videoconferencing. The typical coaching contract may last between six and eighteen months, and sessions typically cost about $300 per hour. An intensive coaching engagement, complete with assessment, interviews, and a package of coaching sessions, may cost from $10,000 to $30,000. A top-executive intervention with a pair of coaches may cost $75,000.

One essential ingredient of successful executive coaching is a clear understanding that the relationship is professional, confidential, and safe for the person who receives the coaching. Without this understanding, coaching cannot work. When choosing a coach, take the time to shop around and interview several prospective coaches before making any commitments. That will increase the likelihood of a good choice. And carefully discuss with each candidate the characteristics of the engagement that are necessary in order for you to feel comfortable.

Guidelines and agreements about where sessions will occur (perhaps away from your business location), confidentiality, privacy, off-limit topics, note taking, collaborative evaluation of progress, and the involvement of other business stakeholders need to be established early. The highest levels of safety and comfort tend to occur in coaching relationships that are purely developmental and not evaluative. However, upon the request of the leader and with his or her written contractual consent, other individuals can be asked to provide assessment information that may assist in establishing goals, rewarding progress, measuring change, and encouraging practice opportunities.

Although you will seldom find a money-back guarantee from coaches, you can realistically expect to see some improvement in your leadership skill within six months. Therefore it’s a good idea to set
specific goals that are measurable and observable by yourself and others. Be sure that setting and measuring goals is a part of the work you do. If the coach doesn’t offer it, ask for it. Remember, executive coaching isn’t supposed to just make you feel better about yourself, although it often does. It is also supposed to lead to noticeable improvement in your leadership effectiveness and to benefit your organization.

How Should Coaching Relate to a Development System?
Executive coaching is most effective when it is a part of a well-thought-out development plan. For example, having a clear sense of a desired career path, arranging a series of developmental assignments (on the job or through job rotation), receiving periodic 360-degree-survey feedback from co-workers, attending leadership classes, attending skill development classes, and having regular developmental conversations with your boss are likely to increase the odds that executive coaching will be successful.

An overall approach to development can leverage a simultaneous coaching effort, helping a leader to achieve visible and measurable improvement in leadership effectiveness and thereby increase the chances of personal and organizational success. Coaching tends to be less powerful when it is pursued in isolation from these other development tools or when it is used simply to prevent derailment. Properly used, executive coaching can help managers take charge of their own careers and obtain more successful outcomes in business.

Conclusion
Today, organizations are making use of executive coaching in many ways. Some provide coaches as a follow-on service when managers complete leadership programs. Some purchase coaching services for all their supervisors or managers at certain levels, and coaching is perceived as a benefit and a reward for promotion.

However they are used, regularly scheduled coaching sessions can provide leaders with the time for reflection, exploration, and assessment and with time to take on a challenge and receive support for improvement. Unfortunately, in today’s busy world managers often don’t take the time to do this important developmental work. Scheduling a session with a coach is a way of making a commitment of time to focus on becoming more effective. It provides a brief reprieve from the constant stream of information, requests, demands, ringing phones, meetings, and ever-increasing workloads. Unless managers allocate time for working on their own improvement, it tends not to happen.

If you would like to learn more about executive coaching, please contact one of the CCL coaching managers: Raoul Buron, Sharon Ting, Ted Grubb, or the author.

SUGGESTED READING

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