

Essential Ways That Coaching Can Help Executives

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Abstract

This article briefly describes four of the most popular types of executive coaching in today's marketplace. The four types are defined in practical terms and suggestions are made with respect to when it might be appropriate to employ each one. The authors present coaching as an important way of getting executives to learn continuously. They place the four coaching types on a continuum based on an assessment of the learning that each executive requires.

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The Roles Coaches Play with Executives

Imagine a professional football team that recruits the best players, puts them through a training camp to hone their technical skills and learn the plays and strategies to win, and then plays the entire season without a prac-

tice or a coach. There is not a team owner in the world that would ever expose such a major investment to that kind of risk. Yet most traditional practices in organizations seem to do just that. People are expected to perform key roles – to lead a new project team, to present financial results to outside

investors, to manage conflicts across departments – all in an exemplary fashion, without training, practice, or coaching. Consequently, many investments in people – the human side of enterprise – have had mixed results. As a result many organizations have turned to coaching. Coaching is recognized in business, in teaching, and in sports as a positive and empowering strategy for performance and leadership development.

For decades, athletes, public speakers, and performing artists have turned to coaches to help them perform better. For individuals already atop their fields, the next level of performance cannot be taught, but it can be learned. To coach in these situations is less to instruct than to facilitate (to make easy). Now this approach has taken hold in business, where top executives are turning to coaches to reach their business and personal best.

Coaching entails individually helping executives to learn and to make the most of that learning. Because these encounters involve executives in different stages of their careers and in varied settings, coaching represents a continuum of roles. *Sans* role, coaching is a process that helps executives learn, grow, and change. Since coaching is situational, what the coaching involves specifically depends on the executive and the situation. For example, Peters and Austin (1985) have discovered that talented leaders and coaches:

Make dozens of intuitive judgments daily about how to work with their people. Sometimes they focus on removing barriers to performance. Other times they immerse themselves in a situation and exert a great deal of influence on the way it turns out. There are times when they help people work through personal or performance problems, and there are

times when the only requirement is to provide straightforward information. In some situations, the coach is the dominant figure while in others the team practically forgets he or she is there (pp. 398-399).

Typically, external (those brought in from outside the organization) coaches have little or no direct influence – much less control – over the outcome. To have direct control is to manage, not to coach. It is the coach's lack of direct control or authority that makes the coaching difficult and challenging. A coach, however, can have considerable power depending on reputation, track record, access to other parts of the organization, and so forth. Absence of authority also makes possible major change, because the person being coached must be motivated internally. True, a coach can be instrumental in encouraging or motivating the executive to learn and to change, but ultimately the changes must be embraced by the executive if they are to be effective.

Coaching is more than an event; it is a continuous process. Good coaching requires a skill, a depth of understanding, and plenty of practice if it is to deliver its remarkable potential. Although some coaches reside inside the organization, this paper addresses the role of external one-on-one coaches in a business context. It does not address other settings, like personal growth seminars or “cyber coaching” over the Internet. Nor does it address group coaching functions like boardroom facilitation and team development. The focus here is on formal coaching – rather than on the many informal opportunities for coaching that arise on a daily basis.

One way to think of executive coaching roles is in terms of client need. Does the executive need to learn a new skill, to perform

better in the present job, or to prepare for a future leadership role? Does the executive understand and acknowledge these needs? Is he or she willing to seek and accept coaching? Or is the executive looking for a confidant to talk through issues and receive constructive feedback before taking action? These questions suggest client need – or primary coaching function – as one key dimension for distinguishing among different coaching roles.

Coaching role refers to the coach's primary function in helping an executive learn, grow, and change. These coaching functions may focus on imparting specific skills, addressing performance issues on the job, or supporting broader changes in the executive's behavior. There are often several coaching functions in any situation, but unless one is defined specifically as primary, there tends to be considerable confusion about expectations and resulting loss of time and effort.

Executive coaching entails several distinctly different roles, based on the primary function:

- Coaching for skills (learning sharply focused on a person's current task);
- Coaching for performance (learning focused more broadly on a person's present job);
- Coaching for development (learning focused on a person's future job); and,
- Coaching for the executive's agenda (learning focused in the broadest sense).

Early in the process, these different executive coaching roles should be clarified and discussed for several reasons:

1. It is important for both executive and coach to recognize the distinctions between the various roles, if only to foster informed choice by everyone taking part in the process – the executive (and possibly family members), the executive's boss, the human resources representative, and the coach providing the service.
2. These role distinctions provide a common language about coaching for both executives and practitioners and a useful way to orient all parties to the process of assessment, feedback, and action planning.
3. These critical distinctions represent a continuing choice through the life of the coaching relationship, but particularly during the early stages. The choices define behaviorally how executives and coaches can work together and can make the difference between meeting or not meeting the executive's expectations.
4. An open discussion of these matters is helpful in creating some ground rules and a feedback system to be used in the coaching process.

Each of the coaching roles has a different contribution to make when it comes to enabling the executive to act. Role clarity is also key in sizing up the situation: how to approach an opening for coaching; what to emphasize; what to leave alone for the time being; where to start. In practice, of course, these coaching roles may overlap over time. A coach contracted to help in skill building may end up working on performance issues. In the process, a longer-term relationship may be forged that contributes to the executive's overall development. Changes in role, however, should be acknowledged specifi-

cally by all parties so that the coaching contract can be changed accordingly.

Executive coaching might be defined as a confidential, highly personal learning process. Typically, the coaching is designed to bring about effective action, performance improvement, and/or personal growth for the individual executive, as well as better business results for the executive's organization. More than other forms of organized learning (for example, workshops or traditional classrooms), coaching is personal in several senses. First, it is individualized. In working one-on-one, there is the recognition that no two people are alike. Each person has a unique knowledge base, learning pace, and learning style. Consequently, executives progress at their own pace, although holding people personally accountable for their progress is often a key element of executive coaching. Second, coaching is personal when uncovering blind spots and changing one's personal style.

Coaching for Skills

Coaching for skills is learning focused on a person's current task or project, typically in the context of the present job. "Skill" is used broadly to include basic ideas, strategies, methods, behaviors, attitudes, and perspectives associated with success in business. Sometimes the executive needs conceptual clarity – "I am not familiar with the basic principles" or "I do not understand why these skills are needed or when to apply them." Other times executives need to build or sharpen a skill associated with success in business or professional life – "I have never learned how to do it" or "I know how, but do not always do it well." Usually this coaching is needed for the short-term (this week, this month) and is clearly identified and agreed on by the executive and others in the organization. Further, coaching for skills represents little or no threat to most learners.

Coaching for skills helps people learn specific skills, behaviors, and attitudes – often over several weeks or months. Situations well-suited to this coaching role include:

- to support learning on the job (for example, before or after a "first" such as a first customer visit or a first board meeting);
- to support traditional classroom training (for example, by reinforcing learning and practical applications back on the job); or
- to support job redesign (for example, when reengineering introduces new or different roles and responsibilities).

Coaching for Development

Coaching for development is learning focused on a person's future job. Typically, the executive needs to prepare for a career move, often as part of succession planning discussions. For some, the challenge may be to strengthen leadership skills for higher levels in the organization. Others may need to "unlearn" a behavior that's become a liability – a strength overdone that has become a weakness. Usually this coaching is viewed as a long-term investment. However, the extent of that investment may vary depending on client need and on the degree to which an organization maintains succession planning systems and success profiles of its executives. Finally, coaching for development can be intense, analytical, and may represent more threat to some learners than coaching for skills or performance. Of all the coaching roles, coaching for development tends to involve a deeper focus on executive development and personal growth. As one coach has said, "This is easy for

people who are introspective and enjoy root canals.”

Coaching for development helps people prepare for advancement – often over an extended period of a year or more. Business examples include providing support for possible promotions or lateral transfers. This coaching role can help:

- to learn more skills and capabilities for a future job, after coaching for performance;
- to clarify shared goals about success when executives and their organizations are at odds about the skills and perspectives needed for success in a future position; or
- to encourage the long-term development of promising people by facilitating learning from challenging career experiences.

Coaching for the Executive’s Agenda

Coaching for the executive’s agenda helps that person realize broader purposes, the results and well-being the executive wants in life – often on an ongoing basis. The scope for this coaching can range considerably and usually goes beyond a single person or situation. Business examples include: mergers and acquisitions, productivity and quality improvement, executive leadership transitions, turnarounds, and coping with explosive growth. Among the situations well suited to this coaching role are:

- to support better decisions when insight and perspective are needed on an executive’s ideas;
- to open up more options when creative suggestions could improve the chances for sound decisions;

- to support change management by preparing an executive to successfully implement specific change initiatives; or
- to guide the executive through unknown or unexplored areas or when the executive feels overwhelmed.

Coaching for Performance

Coaching for performance is learning focused on a person’s present job. Typically, the executive feels the need to function more effectively at work (“I need to do a better job at ...” or to address performance issues – “I am not aware of how my actions have affected others” or “I have not made a commitment to doing it well”). For executives at risk in the workplace, the challenge may be to correct problem behaviors before they jeopardize productivity or derail a career. Although this coaching is usually seen as needed for the short or intermediate term (this quarter, this year), and it is critical for the long term, it is often seen as less urgently needed than coaching for skills. Also, there may be less shared agreement about the need for performance coaching, particularly with regard to the executive at risk. Finally, coaching for performance can represent more threat to some learners than coaching for skills. For others, the experience is challenging, something like private swimming lessons for Olympic-class swimmers.

In coaching-for-performance situations, clarity is mixed as perceived by those considering the coaching (the executive, the boss, and relevant others). Coaching goals are often fuzzy. For example, there may be a presenting problem (“He is not doing it the way he is supposed to ...”) but little clear definition of actual behavior or root causes. Or people may be expected to improve their effectiveness on their own but do not know

how. Likewise, the business reasons for coaching may be less clear than when coaching for skills. Consequently, coaching for performance tends to involve more time, if only to reach clarity and consensus about the need for coaching and desired outcomes.

Coaching for performance helps people improve their effectiveness on the job – often over several quarters or a year or more. This coaching role can be applied to improve performance in a present position:

- to practice and apply effective performance on the job;
- to clarify performance goals when expectations about behavior are unclear or when business goals, roles, or conditions change; or
- to orient and support a newly appointed executive, or someone with significant new responsibilities, in making a smooth transition.

Coaching for performance also can help to change individual behaviors and correct problems:

- to confront ineffective attitudes or other motivational issues;
- to alleviate performance problems when deficiencies jeopardize a person's productivity, job, or career;
- to increase confidence and commitment when seasoned players have experienced career setbacks and disappointments; or
- to deal with blind spots that detract from otherwise outstanding performance.

In these cases, the coach acts as a performance coach by helping executives assess their performance, obtain feedback on individual strengths and weaknesses, and enhance their effectiveness. The coaching sessions typically focus on performance in the present job, although continued improvement may well lead to advancement.

Example Situation

The CEO of a diversified service firm discovered that as the company grew, there was no performance feedback system to accurately assess his performance or that of other key players in the company. The short-term goal was to set viable measures for executive success and apply them to himself and top managers. Longer term, the CEO hoped to establish a leadership development program that would ensure the next generation of executives for the organization.

Process

A coach was hired to help the CEO achieve these goals. They began by defining a success profile of specific skills and behaviors that related to effectiveness in that organization. Based on this competency model, a multi-rater (360-degree) instrument which best measured these competencies was chosen to gather feedback. An assessment was then conducted in which the executive was reviewed by a full circle of board directors, peers, subordinates, and outside customers whose observations of the CEO could be valuable.

Following the assessment, this feedback was presented, along with the coach's observations of the executive, in a series of confidential sessions. The coach and the executive focused on how to learn from the data by (1) interpreting and accepting the data, (2) identifying performance trends and areas for improvement, (3) analyzing reasons for

major performance problems, and (4) establishing action steps for performance improvement.

Results

The CEO described the performance feedback as revealing, accurate, honest, and useful. The feedback was trusted and accepted because it came from the combined judgment of many people with firsthand knowledge of the CEO's performance. With coaching skills after the assessment, the executive saw progress in managing execution, the skill set he selected to develop. Specifically, he was better able to delegate and coordinate work and was more effective in

empowering employees. As a result, both the CEO and others acknowledged that he had become a more effective executive.

Conclusion

In this paper, we focused on some significant distinctions among coaching roles. We want to close by pointing out that all coaching roles have something in common. First, all executive coaching involves action research – or action learning, the user-friendly term. Second, successful coaching involves working in partnership with executives. By combining a coach's observations and capabilities with an executive's expertise, the executive achieves better and faster results.

References

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