

# Choosing an Executive Coach

## Career Management Matters

### WHAT IS EXECUTIVE COACHING?

Leadership in the top management ranks is often a lonely business. It can be difficult to get accurate feedback, for example, and it gets more difficult the higher you move in an organization. Many managers are reluctant to “open up” to colleagues, and sometimes it may be ill advised to do so. Yet it’s difficult to improve leadership skills and job performance without input from others about strengths, weaknesses, and options for improvement. Many managers recognize that to focus their personal development plans they need the uninterrupted time and attention of a skilled, objective facilitator.

Executive coaching is a formal engagement in which a qualified coach works with an organizational leader in a series of dynamic, confidential sessions. Each meeting is designed to establish and achieve clear goals that will result in improved business effectiveness, both for

#### Real Time Instruction

Imagine you wanted to improve your golf game. You could watch an instructional video; you could enroll in a group clinic; you might invest in a private lesson; and you might choose to take a *playing* lesson where your instructor actually goes with you out on the course providing feedback and instruction as you play. All options have value, but the playing lesson provides the greatest results in *applying* all your skills in the actual game setting. Executive Coaching is the equivalent of a playing lesson.

the individual and the organization. A good coach helps executives develop clarity of purpose and focus on action.

There are many valuable development tools besides coaching: developmental assignments, periodic 360-degree-survey feedback from co-workers, skills development classes, and regular developmental discussions with your boss to name a few. Coaching is different because it is an intense personal experience that has elements of all these interventions, but it is applied in real-time.

### What Developmental Challenges Are Suited to Coaching?

There are some situations for which other kinds of consultants and counselors are more appropriate than a coach. Here are some examples of situations in which coaching can facilitate personal development.

Consider hiring a coach if:

- you’ve just completed a development program and have a heightened awareness of skills you need to develop or skills you may rely on too much
- you’re faced with a significant increase in the scope of your responsibility
- you’ve taken on an unfamiliar assignment, such as leading a business turnaround, a start-up venture, a workforce reduction, or a rapid-growth situation
- you’re a project manager who needs to develop better team-building skills
- you’re a leader who wants to be successful at managing across geographic, cultural, or demographic boundaries
- you’re a traditional manager who wants to move to a less dominant and directive leadership style
- you’re an executive who needs to develop, articulate, and sell a new vision for your organization

# Career Management Matters

- you're a line manager who wants to broaden your experience and capacity to take on an executive position
- you need a confidential sounding board to help you workout turning strategies into action
- you're a task-oriented manager who wants to develop interpersonal skills
- you're a technical manager who needs to become adept at articulating ideas, influencing others, and understanding organizational politics.

## Coaching versus Counseling

Some managers are reluctant to engage an executive coach because they equate coaching with psychological counseling or psychiatry. They don't want someone probing into their childhood issues, diagnosing what's wrong with them, and attempting to "fix" them. Executive coaching doesn't fit that medical model. There isn't an assumption of pathology – no belief that the manager being coached is psychologically deficient or needs to be cured. Executive coaches typically don't assume that the roots of management behavior can be or should be traced to events in the distant past. As a rule, executive coaches don't ask why you are the way you are. They focus on how you can make the specific behavioral changes you want to make in line with your current values and goals. Coaches don't think in terms of what's wrong with you. They work to help you identify developmental needs, leverage your strengths, and become more effective in your work.

## What to Expect from Executive Coaching

Coaching engagements typically last for six to eighteen months. The process usually begins with one or more face-to-face meetings in which you will build the necessary rapport and establish realistic guidelines and expectations. During the initial assessment period your coach will get to know you, not only by talking with you but (always with your permission and consent) through some combination of:

- questionnaires and psychological testing instruments that you fill out either on paper or online,
- interviews with your colleagues / boss, and
- review of your performance appraisals..

Less frequent but additional tools may include:

- unobtrusive observation as you go about your work
- interviews with your customers
- interviews with your family members

The coaching sessions will include a review of your assessment information, setting goals, planning change strategies, monitoring and measuring progress against your goals, discussing any setbacks and obstacles that crop up, and celebrating your successes.

A coach may conduct sessions in person, by phone, by e-mail, or by videoconferencing. You and your coach can determine the frequency, length, and medium that suits your needs and your schedule.

Coaching typically covers a minimum of six months. A full package, including assessment, interviews, and a specified number of sessions, can cost between \$10,000 and \$30,000. A top-executive intervention with a pair of coaches can cost \$75,000. In many cases, the cost of coaching is borne by the employer.

# Career Management Matters

## EVALUATING AN EXECUTIVE COACH

Locating the right coach is like finding the right person to fill a key position in your organization. You may want to check out several candidates before you make your selection. You can do initial screening by phone and e-mail. Some questions for this stage are:

- What training in coaching have you received?
- Have you coached individuals in my industry?
- What companies have you worked with?
- How will you assess my current skills?
- What is your philosophy of coaching?
- How will you measure improvement?
- How long do you anticipate the coaching engagement will last?

If you're at the chief executive level, you might also ask how many CEOs the individual has worked with as a coach.

Preliminary screening will help you narrow the search to a short list of coaches who have the competence and experience you're looking for. Watch out for individuals who give vague answers to your questions or try to snow you with a slick sales pitch. Be wary of those who anticipate that the coaching engagement will extend beyond eighteen months -that may indicate an ineffective coaching style or strategy. After you have identified a few good prospects you can conduct interviews.

## Business Expert or Psychologist?

In reading over the characteristics of a good coach you may have realized that the best coaches combine business experience and psychological counseling skills. Both are necessary. You would have trouble discussing your work situation and your organizational challenges with a coach who didn't have current knowledge of business issues and organizational dynamics. On the other hand, you could not get the guidance and support you need to change your behavior from a business colleague who lacked training in psychological assessment and behavioral counseling. Some coaches are psychologists by education and background. Others come out of the ranks of business executives and consultants. Whatever the educational background, coaches need continuing education in both business and behavioral science.

## Competence, Chemistry, and Trust

For coaching to deliver on its promise, it's important to find the coach who is right for you. You need a coach who has business and organizational knowledge along with excellent interpersonal skills. Equally important, you need a coach with whom you feel comfortable.

Finding the right coach can be a tall order because executive coaching is an unlicensed profession. As it stands now, anyone can open a coaching business. It's up to you to ask the questions to determine whether the individual has the appropriate experience and skills.

You may have a strong preference for someone of your own gender or someone of your generation. You may find it more stimulating and productive to work with someone who is different from you. Only you can determine whether the

coach you're considering encourages your trust and confidence. Honor your personal values. If a potential coach strikes you as too slick, too frivolous, too formal, too talkative - too judgmental - trust your intuition. Coaching benefits you only if your coach is someone you respect, someone who puts you at ease.

Safety and trust are paramount in coaching engagements. Your coach must be totally reliable with regard to keeping confidences and not exploiting private information. Coaching won't work if you don't feel completely safe about revealing your doubts, frustrations, and feelings about yourself, your colleagues, and your organization.

## Interviewing the Prospective

**Coach** Changing behavior is always hard work and almost always involves temporary discomfort, awkwardness, and the temptation to revert to familiar patterns and habits. You need to have confidence that your coach is someone who can support you, motivate you, and hold you accountable through personal change in a manner that is both honest and respectful of your dignity. You need to feel that your coach is both skillful and compassionate.

In your first meeting with a candidate for coach, look for these qualities:

- **Executive presence.** The coach should immediately impress you as polished, professional, and articulate. The coach should inspire confidence by his or her own self-confidence and ease.

- **Strong interpersonal skills.** The coach should be a good listener, able to pick up on what you say and to discern the thoughts and feelings behind your words. Is your prospective coach able to confront and challenge statements with which he or she disagrees? Is the coach straightforward

in manner, not afraid to ask for clarification? Does the coach have a sense of humor, and does that sense of humor appeal to you? Does the coach strike you as a warm and empathic person? Does the coach seem to be using your conversation to build rapport and trust, or simply to get hired?

- **Ability to be credible and authentic as a person.** Are you getting a sense that the coach is genuine and straightforward, or that the coach is trying to give the "right" answers? Does your prospective coach seem to be going through the motions" or is there something more concrete and real in the responses to your questions?

- **Skill and knowledge in the use of formal assessment tools.** What kinds of psychological tests will the coach use? Why are those particular tests appropriate for you? What kind of training has the coach had in interpreting test results? How does the coach combine and synthesize data from multiple sources? How will the coach use the assessment data in the ongoing engagement?

- **Skill and knowledge in business demands, organizational life, and corporate politics.** What kind of background does your coach have in understanding the pressures and demands of business? Why is his or her particular experience relevant for you? What kind of responsibility and decision making authority has the coach had? Has the coach hired people? Fired people? Been responsible for budgets? Managed up? Managed down? While your coach is not a business advisor per se, it is important that he or she understands the context of the client's issues.

- **Maturity.** Regardless of the coach's age, he or she should possess the self-awareness and stability to be a good role model. Signs of emotional maturity include willingness to keep learning, the ability to tolerate stress and handle crises, good impulse control, the ability to live with ambiguity and uncertainty, and comfort in receiving feedback.

- **Strong ethical sense.** Your coach should be sensitive to confidentiality. If your prospective coach brags about other clients or gossips about

the inner workings of other companies, you can read that as having little respect for confidentiality. Your coach should also exhibit honesty and integrity, and be strong enough to tell you the truth even when you'd rather not hear it.

## Feel Better or Work Better

You shouldn't expect a money-back guarantee from a coach, but you should expect to see some improvement in your leadership skills within six months. The purpose of coaching is not to make you feel better about yourself, though it often does. The purpose is to change the way you operate in ways that are measurable and observable by yourself and others. Therefore, you should set some specific goals with your coach at the outset of the engagement. Discuss with your coach how progress toward these goals will be measured.

- ***Flexibility.*** Good coaches have the ability to work well with the whole range of personality types and to shift gears when a particular approach is ineffective. Your coach should also have the flexibility to work within the constraints of your schedule. That might mean, for example, that you combine phone conversations or e-mail messages when you are traveling with longer face-to-face sessions.

- ***Solid knowledge of learning theories and change-process dynamics.*** Coaching sessions aren't just informal conversations. The expert coach keeps an eye on the goal, pacing and guiding the sessions to bring about the desired learning and behavioral changes. More

than a cheerleader or a sympathetic ear, the coach must be someone who understands how adults learn and grow and must have the skills to facilitate that learning.

- ***Ability to plan, implement, and manage a relationship over time.*** You've probably encountered people who make a brilliant first impression but whose subsequent performance is disappointing. You want to make sure that the coach not only interviews well but can manage a relationship over time. Ask about the process and progress of past coaching engagements - no names, of course - to judge how the coach moves his or her client toward specific goals over the course of a long-term coaching engagement.

- ***A positive focus.*** The starting point of your coaching engagement should be the strengths and skills you bring to your leadership position. Coaching works best when it's built on leveraging strengths rather than on fixing deficiencies. Your intelligence, abilities, and resourcefulness are the primary sources of your capacity for growth and change. Look for signs that the prospective coach recognizes and respects your strengths and has the confidence that they will carry you through the challenges of making the changes that will make you a more effective leader.

\* some of the information in this article was adapted from The Center for Creative Leadership

## Wenroth Group Coaching Getting Comfortable with Change

The Wenroth Group practices a multi-dimensional approach to coaching, as part of successful Career Management. For most of us, change - even positive changes like promotions and increased job responsibilities - can definitely be unnerving. In fact, the comfort of having an established routine often keeps us in less-than-ideal situations or causes us to derail as we stretch our capabilities. When we do face a change, we prefer it to be of our own choosing, on our own timetable.

No such luck. Not any more.

Change is all around us – often seemingly done *to* us. Every aspect of our lives is affected: career, family, spirit, health, community. Just as we get used to something, else seems to happen before we have even had a chance to adjust. Nowhere is this more true than in our career and professional lives, whether we have outgrown our positions or whether our companies have restructured themselves without us. We need to be super-elastic: flexible, adaptable, totally committed to a vision yet able to change direction on a dime. This requires a comfort level with the very *process* of change.

We see many clients stuck in that process. Many embrace change but get caught up in old behaviors that no longer work. Others are angry that things are not what they used to be, and feel betrayed. Some deny any change related problems, while their colleagues and staff report an increase in lowered morale and turnover due to their boss's new behavior.

All feelings are legitimate; most are justified. None of them matter. Change is happening anyway. And if we can become comfortable with the process of change, we can learn to embrace it and expand our lives and satisfaction.

Understanding that there are new rules governing our lives is a critical to first step to mastering the process:

| OLD RULES  | Vs. | NEW RULES  |
|--|-----|--|
| <b>THE LINEAR RULE</b> which promised progress is we were honest and worked hard. Our lives, careers, economy, & culture would get better and better, year by year, generation by generation if we simply did our best.  | Vs. | <b>THE CYCLICAL RULE</b> which better describes our lives today. We each live a chapter, then renew ourselves and move on to the next; we cycle through the chapters, followed by transitions.   |
| <b>THE STEADY-STATE RULE</b> which said that if we worked hard, we would each arrive at a steady state of security and happiness, which would last for the rest of our lives.  | Vs. | <b>THE CONTINUOUS CHANGE RULE</b> which will not let us rest. We can no longer expect to arrive at a steady state, a time when our lives become crystallized and predictable. We have to learn not to be defeated by it or afraid of it.   |
| <b>THE OUTSIDE-IN RULE</b> which said that to be winners, we should simply follow the cues in our marriage, schools, religions, careers, and laws of the land.   | Vs. | <b>THE INSIDE-OUT RULE</b> which says that, to stay on course, we must rely most deeply on our own inner beliefs. We must be on-purpose people who shape our own actions in a rapidly changing world, with the strength of positive thoughts about how we want to be in the world. |
| <b>THE LEARNING RULE</b> which said that learning is for kids. They learn so they can get launched into adult careers, family life, and leadership roles. Adults shift from learning to working as their main activity and, for the rest of their lives, training outside the workplace plays a minor role | Vs. | <b>THE LEARNING-IS-FOR-EVERYONE RULE</b> which says that learning is our primary activity, no matter how young or old we are. As adults, we must acquire skills, change professions, and do well in a social milieu that often appears as blurry as chaos.                         |
| <b>THE BRAINWARE RULE</b> which says that people bring their mental focus to work and leave their emotions, their spirit, and their physicality at the door when they arrive each morning. Those variables were out of the domain of the organization.   | Vs. | <b>THE WHOLE-PERSON RULE</b> which says that maximum performance requires a multidimensional approach that includes physical energy, mental focus, emotional connection, and value alignment. People bring all of who they are to all that they do - in and out of work.           |