

Executive Coaching 101

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Executive coaching has been touted as an answer to the myriad of corporate problems that exist today. However, there are several key success factors to ensure an effective coaching relationship. It must also be recognized that executive coaching is not suitable for all executives. In this article, we explore the main drivers for a successful executive coaching relationship.

There are cases which would be more effectively handled by other licensed professionals. It is the qualified coach's professional responsibility to recognize when these cases arise and to take appropriate action rather than try to tackle them.

Executive coaching is a formal engagement in which a qualified coach works with an executive in a number of confidential sessions to:

- ◆ Improve business and individual effectiveness
- ◆ Develop the executive's clarity of purpose and focus on action and execution
- ◆ Align one's psycho-emotive strengths to meet the job's requirements
- ◆ Bridge behavioral or perception gaps that hinder the executive's effectiveness and performance

The purpose of coaching is to change the way an executive operates in ways that are observable by self and others. Hence, before entering into a formal executive coaching arrangement, it is imperative to recognize and be realistic about what executive coaching can and cannot achieve.

Coaching typically comes from four sources of coaching professionals:

- ◆ Business (line or staff)
- ◆ Psychologists (counselors, occupational psychologists, clinicians with psychiatric or psycho-analytic backgrounds psychiatrists)
- ◆ Spiritual (religious such as priests, pastors, immans)
- ◆ Sports coaches

Each brings with them a coaching discipline adapted from a particular perspective and professional experience. It is then not surprising that to the priest or pastor, most coachees' problems can be seen to stem from a lack of spiritual direction or focus. Similarly, to the business coach who comes from a human resources background, his/her perspective is angled from one that is naturally focused on people issues, human capital or related organizational cultural factors.

Our view of executive coaching is that it should often take place within the context of a broader executive development program. Executive coaching should be used as a form of a support strategy to achieve specific development aims. This ensures that the executive coaching relationship is anchored off a platform that first identifies specific developmental gaps that need to be prioritized and worked on. An executive coaching relationship should also be in effect for a finite timeframe (usually spanning between 9 to 12 months) and centered on a defined scope or theme (e.g. personal effectiveness, management teamwork and synergy, etc). The benefit of this is that the coaching relationship is then set within defined expectations with an anticipated

outcome and measureable results. It therefore runs less of a risk of becoming “blue-sky” coaching in which topics addressed could be widely varied to the point of being unfocused and or beyond the qualification of the coach.

In addition, we believe in the use of multiple assessment tools and not a reliance on one or two tools to give the complete picture. A combination of tools – psychometrics (e.g. MBTI, FIRO-B), 360-degree feedback (e.g. benchmarks, Skillscope or other existing client versions) and other personality-type tools (e.g. personal values and motive profiling) will give a multi-faceted perspective of the executive’s behavioral make-up. Often, behavioral patterns can be recognized and identified and causal links drawn between what is revealed by several assessment tools. On no account however, should these causal links be taken as given assumptions, they are useful in so far as starting points for discussions and must be validated and tested with the executive on an on-going basis. Additional validation can also be sought through interviews with the executives’ boss, peers, colleagues and family members.

Finally, as the coaching field becomes a major growth industry, the issue of ethical coaching is becoming more and more of an apparent one. Ethical coaching demands that mutual understanding be established in terms of what the coaching relationship is meant to achieve. It also imposes on professional coaches the obligation to recognize and accept that there are areas and behavioral challenges that are beyond their abilities and qualifications. In those cases, referring the executive to other licensed professionals as appropriate would be the only ethical and professional thing to do. This is especially important where the coach has identified that psychological/psychiatric counseling or related interventions are needed by the executive. Oftentimes, the coachee having built up rapport and trust with the coach confides in the coach issues that may be personal in nature. The coach would be well trained to recognize when this takes place and should refrain from offering advice in areas that he or she is not qualified to undertake, even though the temptation may be to assist.

Another sign of a professional and ethical coach is his/her ability to recognize when a potential conflict of interest may arise, such as being in a position to sell additional work (e.g. additional consulting services). In such cases where the need is genuine, the coach should refer the business lead to someone else or ensure that he/she is pitching to a decision-maker that is someone other than the executive he/she is coaching. This is especially important for coaches who work with leaders of functions or organizations.

Many professional coaching bodies that run accreditation training programs today require coaches to adhere to ethical guidelines or run the risk of being subject to reprimand and/or expulsion from their registers. For example, the International Coach Federation includes in its ethical guidelines the following:

- ◆ Coaching Relationship and Contract
- ◆ Client Protection
- ◆ Confidentiality
- ◆ Conflict of Interest
- ◆ Referrals and Terminations
- ◆ Ethical Violations

These spell out in detail what the coach is bound ethically to do in each of the circumstances. Such guidelines will help to ensure that the executive coaching industry maintains its standards and quality; and safeguards executives from becoming victims of “voodoo coaching”.

As with any trade, it takes time for professional standards to become established and become the industry norm. Executives will do well to rely on their own judgment and trusted recommendations in selecting a coach they deem to be well-qualified and professional in his/her practice of the trade.

Main takeaways:

- ◆ Be realistic about what executive coaching can and cannot achieve before engaging an executive coach.
- ◆ Executive coaching should best take place within the context of a broader executive development program.
- ◆ Assessment for development during executive coaching should be based on multiple assessment tools to ensure a holistic picture.

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Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

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