
[Newsletters](#)

[HRWire](#)

[Current Issue](#)

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Executive Coaching: Development-Yes, Remedial-No



TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

Coaching

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There are two main reasons to hire an executive coach. The first is to "provide an expertly tailored, rapid-fire, educational and developmental experience for someone who is facing challenges and would like to create an opportunity to accelerate their growth," says James M. Hunt, DBA, Chair of the Management Division at Babson College, in MA. That's the positive reason.

There is also a negative reason—as a last ditch effort to help an executive who may be having a terrible performance or people issue. This approach is remedial, and frankly, doesn't work well, says Hunt, who is also the author of *The Coaching Organization, A Strategy for Developing Leaders* (Sage Publications, Inc. 2006).

What coaching can do

The further up you move in an organization, the more individualized your development needs to be, and that is what coaching is all about. At the higher levels of an organization, people need to work one-on-one with coaches who hold them responsible for making developmental changes," says Margaret Morford, president of the HR Edge, a human resource consulting group based in Brentwood, TN.

Kay Cannon, who is president of International Coach Federation, a nonprofit resource for business and personal coaches, says that providing executives with a coach provides your top tier employees with a confidential space that allows them to explore ideas, problem solve, really think through things, and make better decisions.

One way coaches help is by using a variety of assessment tools, such as a 360 interview technique with key individuals, who can provide a more comprehensive perspective on what the coachee is doing well and what they might be able to do differently.

"It's interesting," says Cannon. "People have a tendency not to notice what they are doing well." The typical executive is so focused on fixing problems and looking at how to improve themselves, many times they don't acknowledge where they are really strong. So it can be very helpful for executives to get that unbiased perspective on their strengths as well as their opportunities.

According to Hunt, the top issues coaches help executives work on are how to communicate effectively, how to formulate a vision or plan, how to negotiate difficult situations or roles, and how to develop leadership skills, such as managing change, building a team or dealing with tough downsizing or restructuring problems. Coaching can be very useful, he says, when executives are thrown into new roles. It can help them get up to speed more quickly, by helping them understand the fit between themselves as executives and the roles, context, and culture they are going into.

In addition, says Hunt, coaching can also be a great tool for executives who have been overseas, are dealing with reentry issues, and need help planning for the next phase of their careers.

Morford notes that oftentimes coaches are needed to help executives develop people skills. In a lot of cases the drive that has made the executive successful is not conducive for making people want to work with them, she explains. "We often hear from clients who have great senior executives, but nobody wants to work for them anymore because they burn through the support staff."

In this type of situation, coaches will often come in and observe their executive clients while they are conducting a meeting or interacting with key stakeholders, explains Cannon. This allows the coach a chance to provide specific feedback on what their clients may be doing that is effective and offer suggestions on ways to increase their effectiveness.

What coaching cannot do

Coaching is not a substitute for therapy, says Cannon. Nor can it give executives answers about a certain specialty area. For instance, if your executive needs guidance about how to develop a more strategic approach for accounting measures, you should hire a consultant in that field.

Nor will coaching help if there is not a good match between the coachee and the circumstances, says Paul Michelman, editor of Harvard Business Online, who is the author of "Methodology: Do You Need an Executive Coach?" and "What an Executive Coach Can Do for You." For instance, if you have an organization that has put an individual in an unwinnable situation at work and then blames that individual for the problem, there is little a coach can do to fix that situation.

Michelman also points out that coaching cannot fundamentally change who somebody is. If there are certain personality traits that are so deeply ingrained that may prevent the person from being effective, a coach cannot automatically change that, he says. They can, however, help someone make incremental changes.

Hunt agrees. It can't change your personality, he says, nor can it help if the person is in the wrong job. Coaching may help a person cope with being moved to another job, but if you have someone who is much more effective working independently, for example, coaching is not going to help that person completely adjust to being a great team player if they don't want to be.

Don't expect it to help an executive with a serious problem either, says Hunt. Instead, the executive's boss and human resources should be working with that person to resolve the issues. There are times when having an external coach could be valuable, says Hunt, but if the situation is borderline hopeless, then you are just wasting time and money.

Making the process work

From the very beginning, you want to be clear about the desired outcomes of the coaching, says Cannon, and you want to set definite parameters. For instance, will the coaching be face-to-face or by telephone? How often will it occur and how long will it last? In addition, everyone needs to understand the degree of confidentiality in the process, as well as what kind of reports will be given to the company about the experience. "I let the person being coached know that I am not going to be reporting on the coaching sessions unless it is with the client's permission and presence. I will, however, be able and willing to report on the client's participation in the coaching, such as how many sessions the person came to, were they late, and what their level of engagement was," Cannon explains.

Monford says that the best approach is to have the coach meet with both the person to be coached and whoever their immediate supervisor is, because that is the person who will be evaluating whether or not the individual is making progress towards the identifiable goals. It preserves the confidential relationship because it lets the coachee know that nothing is going on behind his or her back, she says.

Follow-up

Coaching is not always successful. Sometimes companies use a coach for the wrong reasons, and there are times when a person is not ready or willing to be coached. Usually, the problem is not with the organization, says Monford, because if the company is bringing in coaches, they usually support the process. The problem, most often, is with the coachee. For instance, she notes humorously, there was an article in the *Harvard Business Review* about corporate psychopaths [October 2004] that noted that they often wind up at the top levels of organizations. Coaching is probably not going to work for them. Additionally, she says, you probably will not be able to do a 360 review, because no one is going to give any feedback, because they are too scared it will come back to haunt them.

So, how do you tell if it's working? There are three ways, says Morford:

- First, talk with the coachee's manager to see if there have been any noticeable changes, because if this is working, you should see some change.
- Second, get feedback from the person being coached. However, Morford, warns, their feedback could be a bit skewed. If you have someone who never really bought into

the idea of having a coach, they may not be able to provide much information that is valuable.

- Finally, make sure you receive reports from the coach about how involved the coachee was—not just did they attend each session, but whether or not they were actively participating or just going through the motions.

Check out your coach

There are a lot of coaches out there, a number of them with little training to do the job right. You have people who say they are a coach and have taken a course, says Morford, but they aren't properly trained. What often happens then is the person often ends up somewhere between the executive's psychologist and mentor. That's not the right relationship for a coach, Morford says.

The certification processes in place now are mixed in their quality, says Hunt, and as yet "we don't have good research on whether or not credentials help." That doesn't mean you shouldn't ask for credentials, he says. But more than that, what you should do is meet with the coach and ask for references from other companies. Then call those references and do a thorough vetting around satisfaction, integrity, and effectiveness.

Cannon, whose organization International Coach Federation (ICF) does offer a comprehensive certification process, provides a few more suggestions. The coach should abide by a code of ethics and should have specific training in coaching. The ICF's web site provides their code of ethics and a set of coaching core competencies for consumers. You can access them at <http://www.coachfederation.org/ICF>.