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## Executive Coaching

### An Overview

As individuals advance to higher leadership levels, candid feedback becomes increasingly important, less reliable, and harder to find. One-on-one interaction with an objective third party can provide clarity and focus that simply cannot be found in other forms of organizational support. That third party is, with growing frequency, an executive coach.

Twenty years ago executive coaching was seen as remedial or punitive. Today it is recognized as an investment in the future of leaders that benefits clients, members, boards of directors, staff, and the bottom line. In the 2010, *Advancing Executive Coaching* editors Gina Hernez-Broome and Lisa Boyce estimated that 70 to 80 percent of American companies were using coaches. The field is continuing to grow in response to the greater demands on leaders to manage more diverse, often global teams in more challenging technological, uncertain environments.

### What is executive coaching?

Executive coaching is a professional partnership that facilitates a leader's personal and professional development to build competencies and achieve strategic business objectives. Coaching is conducted through one-on-one relationships based on mutual trust and respect and informed by data from multiple perspectives.

The executive coach serves as an unbiased source of information and feedback, a thought partner, a collaborative strategist, and a confidante. Topics for coaching are as varied as the challenges that face leaders. They most often fall under categories such as: strategic thinking, planning, fostering change, organizational effectiveness, interpersonal and professional communication, performance management, dealing with conflict, and building effective teams.

The frequency and duration of coaching depend on the client's goals, resources, and time frame. Regular meetings, usually weekly, are typical for working on set goals; however, in some relationships executive coaches are brought in on an as-needed basis to advise and collaborate on a variety of issues over time.

### Who uses executive coaches?

Board leadership, CEOs, senior executives, and managers are the most likely candidates. Some executives use coaching as a pro-active component of their professional lives. Some use it in times of change or when they want to improve specific areas of performance. Many organizations offer coaching to high-potential employees at multiple levels as a means of preparing them for leadership positions.



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### How does executive coaching work?

By definition executive coaching is highly personalized; therefore, no set method applies to all situations. Effective coaches will be flexible enough to adapt their coaching styles to accommodate differences in personality, capability, and work place.

Allowing for customization to meet individual needs, executive coaching includes variations on the following steps.

- Assessment of the client's needs and goals. This takes place in initial dialogue between the coach and client, and it may include input from other sources or from testing.
- Research to provide background and context for the process. This is likely to include limited exploration of the mission, structure, policies, and business model to ensure that the coaching is consistent with the organization's regulations and to help the coach understand the leader's circumstances. It may include interviewing others, such as direct reports and peers, to identify differences between the client's self-perception and the way others perceive him or her.
- Developing, with the client, a coaching plan based on identified issues, goals, and resources. The formality of such plans varies widely, but they are likely to include goals, the roles of the coach and client, the method, frequency, and anticipated term of sessions, where and how coaching will take place, and other administrative details.
- Engaging in a dialogue, over time, to work through the coaching plan. This key part of the process involves:
  - Tactical problem solving
  - Developing leadership capabilities and new ways of thinking and acting that can be applied to a variety of situations and roles
  - Building skills and habits of self-awareness to ensure that learning will continue after coaching ends
- Ongoing evaluation and feedback.
- Closure, when coaching is on a fixed time schedule or budget. In some cases executive coaches are on-call resources for clients over time.

### What can you expect from your coach?

The work of executive coaches is as varied as the people and problems they meet. They may be used as advisors, teachers, thinking partners, co-strategists, devil's advocates, data gatherers, confidants, sources of structure, or advocates. The characteristics you can expect include:

- Unbiased, nonjudgmental attentiveness
- The versatility to support your individual personality and situation
- Clear communication and structure that helps define your path and your progress



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- Productive challenge geared to your capability
- Enthusiasm for identifying and solving problems with (not for) you
- An informed, objective viewpoint to add to your perspective
- Insightful recognition of your strengths and areas for improvement
- Assistance in understanding the behavior of others and what is expected of you
- Help defining your values, goals, and expectations, as well as guidance on how to achieve them
- Encouragement
- Confidentiality regarding your dialogue with the coach and anything the coach learns about your organization through his or her work with you.

### How can you get the best return on your coaching investment?

Coaching is a personal relationship grounded in trust; the more fully engaged you are in the process, the more you will get from it. Engagement, in this case, means candor, honesty, and a willingness to consider new ways of thinking and behavior. You can expect to feel supported, rewarded, even inspired by your efforts. You can also expect hard work that may be uncomfortable at times. With your coach you will be trying to incorporate new ideas into a mature system so that you can continue to make progress independently. That takes time and effort, but the vast majority of clients describe it as highly rewarding.

- Make a commitment to candor and honesty that is likely to exceed what you expect in the work place. Acting on this commitment will go hand-in-hand with developing trust with your coach, but the fewer filters you employ, the more quickly your coaching will proceed.
- Listen actively. A strong coach will choose language very carefully. Pay attention to nuance. Ask questions whenever you're in doubt; coaching is a safe place to admit what you don't know.
- Be receptive to feedback from your coach and your peers. Bear in mind that a neutral third party whose sole agenda is to support you may have to tell you things that are hard for you to hear. Some will be critical; some, affirming.
- Pay close attention to the possibility that you're resisting. It's acceptable, even healthy, to disagree with your coach in the interest of clarity, but stubbornness will interfere with your progress.
- Act on feedback and on agreements you make with your coach.
- Show up for sessions on time and prepared. Do your homework. Consider your agenda for each session ahead of time.
- Give your coach feedback. Let him or her know what's working for you and what could be more helpful.
- If you experience fear and anxiety, acknowledge them as the companions of change, and move past them. Or, as Winston Churchill said, "When you're going through hell, keep going."



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- Focus more on tomorrow—which you can do something about—than on yesterday, which you can't change. Acknowledge your mistakes, allow yourself to feel good about your accomplishments, and be encouraged that you are working to improve.

## Choosing an executive coach

### Credentials

The qualities that make a good executive coach are more likely to be based in broad experience, empathy, and unique communication skills than in a set curriculum or degree. Academic programs dedicated to coaching are still rare because the field is new and has grown rapidly. While some universities teach executive coaching within their MBA programs, none offer degrees in it. Unlike legal and medical professionals or therapists, coaches are not licensed. Some coaches will hold certificates from the American Management Association or any number of professional schools; however, reputation and chemistry are more reliable guides than authentication.

### How to find a coach

Method and background are important, but as with any personal relationship, coaching relies on your capacity to share a respectful, trusting dialogue. Interview as many candidates as it takes until you find someone who feels both competent and compatible.

- Seek recommendations from colleagues who have used coaches personally or who have had exposure to a variety of coaches. Your Human Resources department may be a resource. The International Coaching Federation has a coach referral service.
- Ask about the prospective coach's method. What will his or her role be during the coaching process? What kind of balance between challenge and support can you expect? How often will you meet? What can you expect in terms of confidentiality?
- Assess prospective coaches on their knowledge of people, relationships, organizations, and behavioral change. These are much more important than the specifics of your technical skills or field.
- Ask for references and check them.