



Executive *action* series

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Management Trends . . .

How to Make Executive Coaching Work for Your Company and Executives

by Rick Koonce

“Outstanding coaches and mentors get inside the heads of the people they are helping. They sense how to give effective feedback. They know when to push for better performance and when to hold back. In the way they motivate their protégés, they demonstrate empathy in action.”

– Author Daniel Goleman
Working with Emotional Intelligence (1998)

There are four basic questions companies, HR managers, and business executives need to ask if they're thinking about introducing executive coaching in their organization:

- What exactly is executive coaching?
- How might an executive in my company benefit from having a coach?
- To whom on my leadership team should I offer executive coaching?
- How exactly does one go about matching a coach with a prospective “coachee?”

Executive coaching has emerged in recent years as a customized development option that companies are offering to key executives and managers to:

- help already strong corporate performers become truly stand-out performers;
- prepare recently promoted executives for new job responsibilities;
- position high potential managers for future promotion; and
- help executives and managers of many levels develop critical people skills and self-awareness that are increasingly required to manage people and operate successfully in today's global business environment.

The demand for executive coaching services is growing—and growing rapidly. According to a 2004 survey conducted by Right Management Consultants some 86 percent of companies say they use coaching to help enhance the skills of people who have been identified as key future leaders of their organization. Coaches work intensively one-on-one with leaders to help identify strengths and weaknesses, and to help leaders optimize their individual job performance. They do this within the context of unique working relationships with their clients that are based on trust, mutual accountability, honesty, and unvarnished conversation about issues that are seldom addressed in more conventional workplace settings.

Who in your organization is an appropriate candidate for executive coaching? Consider the role that personal coaches play to world-class athletes. Sports superstars like Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong employ coaches. They do it because they take “pride in mastery,” and because they know a personal coach can help them refine

their already highly-developed skills, gain new insights about themselves, and push the boundaries of their learning and thinking when it comes to excelling in their respective sports.

Coaches can play a similar role in a business or organizational setting with top performers and high potentials. An executive coach might be asked to come in and help a senior executive become more effective at strategy development and execution, or to help a new manager learn how to effectively manage a virtual or multi-cultural team. He or she might be asked to help a newly-promoted executive learn to manage an expanded array of job responsibilities or become more adept at delegation, strategic decision-making, communication, or managing through influence. In still other instances, a coach might be retained to help an executive lead a major change initiative or to help a leader improve their interpersonal skills so they can deal more effectively with other top executives, or with customers, company directors or other stakeholders.

What Makes Executive Coaching Unique

How does the coaching process actually work? And how is it different from traditional management consulting or training? Coaching differs from traditional consulting and training in at least four key ways:

1. At its core, executive coaching is a designed alliance between two equals – a “coachee” and a coach who work closely together over a specified period of time – typically six to 12 months. Its goal is to facilitate learning, personal growth, increased self-awareness, and achievement of specific professional or developmental goals in the executive or manager. The outcome of doing so is typically linked closely to improving a company’s overall business performance, or to aligning top leadership to promote better execution of business or organizational strategy.
2. While executive coaches often bring specific subject matter expertise and business line experience to the coaching process, the principal role of a coach isn’t to provide specific solutions or industry advice regarding business problems – as a consultant would do. Instead, it’s to ask penetrating and powerful questions, to spark ideas and discussion, to challenge and engage the coachee, and to help generate insights and options in the mind of that individual that can create shifts in the person’s thinking, awareness and perspective, and help him or her more effectively manage the challenges they face, or the problems they’re dealing with. Such conversations typically become the basis for the coachee and coach developing a leadership development or executive action plan, as well as specific metrics and timeframes for achieving specific performance goals.
3. Unlike traditional training, whose aim is to transfer specific hard skills or knowledge to executives and managers, executive coaching often focuses more on “people skills” development, and on helping technically talented managers and executives acquire a fuller understanding of their behavior, personal style, and impact on others. The development of “people skills” (e.g. emotional and social intelligence, right-brain thinking, strong self-awareness, etc.) traditionally has *not* been part of the curriculum at most business schools. Nor is it a topic that gets strong emphasis in many corporate training programs. Coaching however provides an ideal context in which this can occur. Through use of 360-assessments, coaching feedback, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and other tools, coaching provides a unique “learning ground” in which managers and executives can gain important self-awareness, and build skills that are increasingly necessary in managing today’s highly diverse and geographically dispersed workforces.
4. At its best, executive coaching is concerned not just with improving an executive’s everyday performance on the job, but also with facilitating that individual’s personal transformation, ongoing growth, and continuous learning. The ability to embrace all three of these things is a key requirement of 21st century leaders. They are also key underpinnings of emotional intelligence, social dexterity, and leadership resilience – key attributes of successful leaders and managers in today’s increasingly complex business environment.

The Building Blocks of Successful Coaching Relationships



All this said, coaching is *not* therapy. Coaching is not intended to address deep-seated psychological issues that may contribute to nonproductive, inappropriate or even destructive behavior in the workplace. Instead, executive coaching is results-focused. It is also relatively short term in duration. When used with individual executives or whole teams of leaders and managers, it embodies a number of key ingredients and follows a structured series of steps, which ensures consistency of results, and reliability of positive outcomes.

What’s involved in bringing executive coaching into an organization? Doing it right requires four things: strong sponsorship by an organization’s senior leaders; careful review and selection of coaches; consideration of the range of services to offer executives and managers; and, appropriate matching of coaches to individual executives and managers—“coachees.”

Top Leadership Should Emphasize the Importance of Executive Coaching to Organizational Success

If you’re thinking of introducing executive coaching into your organization, it’s important that it be championed by the company’s top leaders, and ideally by the CEO. It should be introduced as a vehicle for helping drive execution of business strategy, or as part of some large-gauge business or leadership initiative.

When coaching is positioned within an organization this way—as having a critical linkage to the success of the business — it sets the tone and expectation for what executive coaching is intended to do and gives it a strong leadership stamp of approval. It indicates to executives and managers that the company is strongly committed to executive coaching as a way to improve or enhance individual job performance, foster learning and leadership resilience, and to align individual executive or management performance with strategic business goals and the company’s mission and vision.

While a company’s HR department has a critical role to play in supporting and administering executive coaching, coaching should not be perceived by line executives and managers solely as an HR initiative, but rather as a business initiative emanating from the executive suite with a close linkage to the company’s bottom line business success. For this reason, a CEO and his or her top management team may want to retain coaches of their own, and make it known to others that they are doing so.

Building a Team of External Coaches

As part of introducing coaching into an organization, it’s important to identify a cadre of coaches that your company is interested in making available to executives and managers. The corporate HR department will, in many cases, have access to information about coaches in the local areas where a company operates. Appropriate coaches can also be found through discrete executive referrals, networking, and contacting local chapters of organizations such as the International Coach Federation (ICF) (www.coachfederation.org), and the Human Resources Planning Society (HRPS) and its affiliates around the country (www.hrps.org).

Focus on hiring coaches with proven credentials. For example, you should engage coaches that are professionally certified and/or that are graduates of recognized coaching programs. They should also come with strong referrals or good references. In addition, look for coaches with solid business and line experience, who can relate personally to the challenges that today’s business executives and managers face. Finally, you’ll

want to find coaches who are good at connecting with many kinds of people. As part of vetting coaches, the HR department should interview individuals to better understand their personal coaching approaches, their coaching philosophy, and the specific kinds of tools they use in their coaching engagements.

Scale of Services to Offer

Your company needs to decide what level(s) of coaching to offer executives and managers. Some companies, for example, offer a range of coaching options to individuals, based on seniority, specific job responsibilities, and other factors. Some limit coaching services to a stipulated number of meetings or hours over a certain period of time, typically six months to a year. In other cases, and particularly for very senior executives, a company may offer a fuller range of coaching options that include weekly meetings with a coach, administration of 360-degree assessments that are then used as the basis of initial coaching work, 24/7 coach availability, and “shadowing” (where a coach travels and observes a top executive in meetings with employees, other senior executives, and with other stakeholders.)

Sometimes coaches will give executives and managers “assignments” in between meetings that are designed to help the coachee identify and prioritize their coaching goals, and develop a coaching action plan. In some cases coaches also prepare summary reports of their initial meetings with new coachees, which are then used as a foundation for beginning a coaching engagement.

E-mail interaction and phone calls are normal components in all coaching engagements. E-mail dialoguing back and forth with a coachee in between face-to-face coaching meetings can accelerate the coaching process, especially when a coachee has a chance to reflect and interact about the issues discussed earlier face to face. Coaching done over the phone and via video conferencing link can also be effective.

Matching Coaches and Coachees

Once you develop a cadre of coaches you are comfortable with, it's time to inform your leadership and management team that they are available to meet with interested parties within the organization. Generally, a company should give executives and managers who are being offered executive coaching the opportunity to interview several individuals, before making a decision about whom to work with. "Comparison shopping", if you will, is a good way to ensure a good fit between individual coaches and coachees. Executive coaches understand that this is one of the protocols of the business. They too will be looking for a good fit with the individuals they work with, and in some cases may recommend, after meeting a prospective coachee that they are not the best fit to work with that person. This is a sign of professional integrity. It should bolster your confidence in introducing that coach to other coaching candidates in the future — individuals with whom there may be a better fit.

If it's your role within the company to introduce coaches to prospective coachees, it's best to avoid offering the same coach to both an executive and his or her direct reports.

Once your company's coaching program has been put in place, coaching engagements typically follow a programmed series of steps. Those steps include the following:

Step 1: Alignment Meeting

Once a coach and coachee have been paired, it's critical that the HR department (working with the coach and coachee) arrange a four-way meeting that includes the coach, coachee, the coachee's superior, and sometimes a representative of HR. I call these meetings "alignment meetings" and they are designed to ensure that there is broad general agreement at the start of a coaching engagement as to what areas of focus the coaching will have. This is generally a 30 to 60 minute meeting, during which the coachee's supervisor shares his or her perspectives, and the coachee describes what he or she hopes to achieve out of the coaching relationship. It is generally agreed at such meetings that the coach will report back at regular intervals to both the HR

department and the coachee's boss as to the general progress of the coaching engagement. However, during this meeting, it is also made clear that the specific subject matter discussed in one-on-one coaching is confidential.

Step 2: The Initial Meeting between Coach and Coachee

In an initial coaching meeting, the coach normally outlines to the coachee what executive coaching is designed to do. The coach discusses issues of confidentiality, accountability, and supervisor "report backs" with the coachee, and together the two parties "contract" with one another for purposes of going forward.

As part of the contracting process, both parties make commitments to the other about the roles they will bring to the coaching process. Because coaching is best thought of as a "co-equal" process (an alliance between peers) the coachee must bring an openness and willingness to look at issues impacting their own leadership and management of others, and be willing to invest time, energy, and attention to develop a coaching action plan with a set of clear and concrete goals. The coach must bring curiosity, authenticity, and integrity, a willingness to ask searching questions, to be direct, to challenge the coachee when appropriate, and to help the coachee articulate a set of coaching goals.

After contracting occurs, the coaching engagement begins in earnest. The coach typically queries the coachee about what his or her coaching goals are, and initiates the process of getting to know the coachee in more depth. Significant biographical information is collected, along with a career history and current professional goals. At this point, the coachee and coach will usually review any existing 360-degree assessments, past professional development plans and other documents to mine insights from these that may be useful to the coaching process going forward. The two may also agree that other assessment instruments will be administered (e.g. a fresh 360-assessment) if it's deemed helpful to enhancing the coaching process. In some cases, a coach will meet informally alone with a coachee's supervisor and sometimes with that person's direct reports, to further gather contextual information that can inform the coaching process.

While data collection is a key part of the early engagement process, during this period the coach also begins to engage in something called deep listening, which is intended not only to hear and take in specific information, but also to discern underlying patterns of thought and belief in the coachee. Does the individual appear to be self-empowered, with a strong sense of their ability to influence others and shape events? Or, does he/she display negative attitudes or affirm self-limiting beliefs? Careful observation can provide important clues to an individual's professional self-perception. The coach also notes things such as vocal inflection, energy level, eye contact, body language, and degree of engagement, because they too tell part of the "story" of who the coachee is.

Listening to the client's "story" is, in fact, an exercise that continues throughout the duration of a coaching relationship. It is essential to understanding what the coachee brings to the coaching process, and provides a critical backdrop to understanding the issues and areas of priority that the coaching engagement will necessarily focus on.

Step 3: Client Assessment and Goal Setting

As the coaching process moves forward, data-gathering, observation, and conversation continue and broaden. Because an individual brings many "elements of self" to the coaching process—their life history, professional experiences, personal beliefs, and subjective worldview—it's important to gain insight into each of these areas as coaching proceeds for it provides important clues about "the person they are" today.

Coachees are often asked to answer questions about how they view themselves in the context of their organization. For example, to what extent do they feel aligned with the company's mission and values? To what degree do they understand its culture, politics, organizational dynamics, and history? To what extent do they feel aligned with their boss and colleagues? And, to what extent does their own management style match that of their boss and co-workers? All these factors influence a person's success and effectiveness in an organization.

They are also asked if there's anything that's not on their resume or part of their professional profile that's nonetheless important to helping the coach understand who they really are. You can often glean critical insights into who a person really is, for example, if you understand something about their bedrock beliefs, if you know they had a life-changing personal experience in their mid-twenties that put them on the professional path they're on today, if you know they have a child with a learning disability, or if you find out they're an aficionado of exotic travel or extreme sports.

Gathering background data on a coachee (about many areas of their life) provides important clues and conversational "cues" to use as the coaching relationship moves along. It also gives one an informed understanding and keen appreciation for the "person behind the professional face" and that's important.

As conversations proceed over the course of several coaching meetings, the coachee typically comes up with five to eight specific coaching goals they want to pursue, given the organizational context in which they work, and the nature of the position they currently hold.

Step 4: Determining Measures of Success

As noted earlier, a key element in making executive coaching work is ensuring the coachee and coach agree on specific metrics that will be used to assess their coaching progress.

Thus, a coachee who decides that one of their goals is to improve their team leadership skills might decide to query their executive team about this at the start of the coaching process, and then again six months later. (The process itself may be informal or anonymous, depending on the circumstances and issues involved.)

Or, a coachee who decides one of their coaching goals is to improve the clarity of their communications with their direct reports might agree to use data from a 360-assessment conducted before coaching work starts, as a baseline for measuring their progress with this goal six months after coaching begins.

Sometimes the coach and coachee decide to include the coachee's immediate superior both in determining the metrics of success, and in providing key input into the coachee's development plan. Sometimes too, the coach becomes involved as a data collector to help coachees determine how they're doing in specific areas. Typically such data collection takes the form of pre-approved one-on-one interviews with a coachee's boss, subordinates, peers, customers, and other organizational stakeholders in the organization.

In any case, to make the coaching process work, and generate specific results, it's critical that the coachee and coach articulate specific metrics by which the coachee will define success with each goal they identify, and then hold themselves accountable for progress in each area over time.

Step 5: Creating the Coachee Development Plan

As the coach and coachee work to define development goals (and associated metrics and timeframes for accomplishing them) it's also important that the coachee develop a personal mission statement to drive their actions and shape their development plan. In addition, the coach and coachee need to identify specific skill gaps in an executive or manager's background, and identify available training or leadership development programs that may be available to help address these skills gaps.

In today's corporate environment there are many training and continuous learning options that a company may want to make available to executives, based on needs determined in executive coaching discussions. For example, coaching may determine that a high potential executive would benefit from a special set of rotational job assignments that expose him or her to other parts of the business, or that participation in a senior leadership seminar offered by a leading business school or leadership institute would help that person develop stronger skills in the areas of global strategy formulation, brand building, and business execution.

Step 6: Implement the Plan

Once coaching goals have been established, timeframes for completion have been agreed to, and action steps initiated, it's important that the coach and coachee continue to meet on a regular basis to review progress in achieving goals, and to discuss issues of interest or challenge to the coachee, as they arise.

During this period, it's generally good for the coach and coachee to talk on a regular basis, every two weeks or so, and to be in touch by e-mail as well.

During this same phase of coaching, a coach will sometimes check in with a coachee's direct reports, or "shadow" his or her coachee, to see how the individual is applying ideas and principles discussed in coaching in real life situations with employees and co-workers. Also during this phase, a coach may do role-plays with coachees as a way to address specific challenges they may be dealing with. And in some cases too, the coach will use videotape feedback to help the coachee understand how he or she comes across when delivering public presentations, interacting with employees, conducting employee town hall meetings, delivering speeches to external audiences or in other cases, interacting with the press.

In some cases, a coach may recommend journaling, meditation, regular exercise, and other forms of recreation to help people reduce stress and restore a semblance of life/work balance to hectic travel and meetings schedules.

Another tool is called "powerful questioning", which is designed not just to elicit factual information, but to challenge a coachee's current thinking about a topic. Powerful questions can be used to help a coachee think about things in new ways, to help them become more aware of how their behavior or demeanor impacts others, to point out inconsistencies in a person's thinking and actions, or to challenge a person's assumptions or self-limiting beliefs.

Step 7: Broadening the Coaching Conversation

Inevitably, as coaching proceeds, the pathways of conversation broaden. As part of the coaching process we sometimes move into areas of discussion separate from work, but which impact who the individual is *at* work.

So, for example, discussion of family, children, spouses/significant others, and relationships sometimes comes up, as does discussion of long-term career and personal goals.

Good coaching is flexible and holistic enough to accommodate discussion of all these things — and, in fact, to encompass all “domains” of a person’s life. This includes not just the intellectual domain (the domain of the “public or professional self”) but also the emotional domain (the “heart” and emotions), the somatic domain (the “body”), and the domain of self-actualization and life purpose.

The Intellectual Domain (Left-Brain)

As you would expect, a great deal of business coaching begins and remains largely in the “intellectual domain” — the domain of left-brain, linear, analytical thinking and problem-solving.

But there’s more to people than just their intellect. Which is why, as coaching proceeds, it’s not unusual for a coach and coachee to embark on a broader conversation together; one that begins to acknowledge and look at the *emotional* domain of a person’s life—their feelings, passions, the compelling experiences that have shaped the arc of their lives and made them the person they are today. These are then tied back to discussion of how they present themselves today—in the workplace, in interactions with others, and so forth.

The Emotional Domain (Right-Brain)

It can be especially rewarding for coaches, when the coachee begins to feel safe sharing some of their humanity—be it their passions and dreams or their fears, regrets, insecurities and doubts. In this domain live strong forces of identity, creativity and imagination that shape our behaviors and character in the world in multiple ways but which we seldom acknowledge publicly—even to ourselves.

The domain of the heart and right-brain is an important one to plumb in the course of executive coaching because it is the seat of our self-awareness. It’s also the realm of the “creator”, “inventor”, “builder”, “unifier”, “organizational steward”, and “visionary leader” — all critical qualities of contemporary leadership. Good coaching often helps everyday “rational” people learn how to access their “heart” and “right brain” more, so they can exercise more creativity in their work, more vision and compassion in their leadership, and more artfulness and empathy in their management of people.

The Somatic Domain (Physical)

Sometimes coaching conversations will also venture into the *somatic* realm or how we manifest ourselves physically to others and to ourselves. Somatic coaching takes many forms:

For example, if an executive is interested in building stronger “leadership presence” with others it’s often important to work with the individual to help them become more *physically* comfortable interacting with other people — either in small, interpersonal situations or in large-scale settings, like employee town hall meetings and public events. In these cases, coaching may consist of working with the person to help them develop more confident body language, develop better facilitation skills, or to become a more effective public speaker.

Somatic coaching also has applications in the areas of health and wellness.

A coach may recommend ways that a coachee can establish better life/work balance or “listen” to their body for signs of work-related stress. The coach and coachee may also use physical exercises such as deep breathing, guided imagery, or reflective listening. In still other cases, a coach may recommend that a coachee do massage or yoga, take a stress management course, or get referrals from a doctor for physical therapy.

The Domain of Personal Actualization

Beyond the intellectual, emotional and physical domains lies the domain of individual self actualization. When conversations go here, it's because coachees have indicated an interest in exploring deeper issues of life purpose and personal meaning. For example, people sometimes say, "What am I doing here, in this job?" Or, "I'm not a religious person, but on the other hand, I do believe in spiritual things. What are some ways that I can bring a spiritual side to my leadership of others?" Or, "I really care about this organization and the people that work here. I want to show that compassion and care in my leadership by being a servant leader."

Questions like this are sometimes quite appropriate for people to explore in the context of executive coaching because they get at issues of career/life direction, long-term life planning, self-actualization, personal "meaning making", and what psychologist Erik Erickson calls "generativity"—a concern for the next generation. All of these things are important considerations in the formation of healthy, evolved and high-functioning individuals — and by extension of powerful, effective and empowering executives and managers.

Step 8: Evaluate Progress and Next Steps

As coaching proceeds, it is obviously important for the coachee to provide feedback to the coach on how he/she feels the coaching is going. Is the coachee being successful in implementing their action goals? Is he/she getting positive feedback from co-workers and superiors in the areas where coaching needs were indicated? What does the coachee think of the coaching relationship itself? Does the coachee feel both supported *and* challenged? Has trust been firmly established, and is there good chemistry between the coach and coachee?

"Good chemistry" can be a tough element to measure, yet it is important to successful coaching relationships. Because coaching relationships are co-equal, it is appropriate for the coach to occasionally ask the coachee for feedback, for example by asking "Is the approach we're taking here helpful to you?"

Good chemistry between coach and coachee is important because it creates momentum in the relationship, and binds the parties together in a mutual endeavor.

Step 9: Wrap Up: Completing the Formal Coaching Engagement

As noted most coaching engagements last from six to 2 months, sometimes longer. And, they can involve different levels of service, depending on the seniority of a particular executive or the needs of a company or organization.

All that said, there comes a time when formal coaching engagements end; when the coachee has achieved good progress with their coaching goals, and structures have been put in place to evaluate their continuing progress on a going-forward basis.

To bring formal closure to a coaching engagement, a coach will, at some point, make a final report back to the coachee's boss about topics covered, and hold a three way close-out meeting that includes the coachee and the coachee's supervisor. Sometimes a member of the HR department is also present for these meetings.

Even after formal coaching ends, however, it is not unusual for coaches to stay in contact with coachees, and to be available for occasion phone calls or meetings. Also, because good rapport has generally been established between coach and coachee, it is not unusual for business friendships to evolve from coaching relationships, and for coaches to be brought back to organizations to work with a coachee's colleagues in some cases.

Conclusion

The field of executive coaching continues to evolve today, but in general, successful coaching agreements are based on a high degree of professional integrity on the coach's part, and a willingness on the part of the coachee to embark on the "coaching journey" —one that can be both professionally rewarding and personally transforming for that individual.

There must be strong trust and rapport between the coach and coachee in order for coaching conversations to proceed forward in a substantive way. Moreover, both parties to the relationship should come to early agreement as to the scope of their coaching engagement, and the concrete goals that the coachee will strive to achieve. Finally, metrics and feedback are key to successful coaching engagements, and to ensuring tight alignment of the coaching process with the needs of the coachee, the coachee's direct superior, and the organization.

No doubt the field of coaching will keep evolving in the years ahead, as executives and managers continue to be challenged by the demands of a global business environment, and the need to manage new generations of workers in far different ways than was necessary in the past. Today, the globalization of business and the flattening of organizations have created new challenges for leaders in every sector of business. And, it is prompting far-sighted organizations and leaders everywhere to explore ways to effectively align people to meet the needs of business, while optimizing individual work performance.

About the Author

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