

Different Facets of Executive Coaching

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Executive coaching is on the rise. Here are the types of coaching approaches and how to conduct them.

A few years ago, the only time an organization would bring in an executive coach was to deal with a derailing executive. Now, it's common to provide a coach to meet privately with leaders every month or so to discuss and work on their personal learning and development issues. Should it be part of your leadership development strategy?

Before we answer that question, here are the major categories of executive coaching:

- Feedback coaching
- In-depth development coaching
- Content coaching.

Each is implemented differently and though the processes vary based on specific company needs, in general all types of coaching can help leaders who need to enhance their skills or improve in a specific area.

Feedback coaching.

This type of coaching, which typically takes one to six months, involves giving feedback to a leader and helping him or her create a development plan to address specific needs. It's generally accompanied by a 360-assessment instrument, with which the coach helps the leader analyze the data to identify strengths and areas needing development. Usually, there are several follow-up conversations between the coach and the leader, which can take place face-to-face or on the phone. Some companies are experimenting with follow-up coaching via videoconferencing or desktop.

In-depth development coaching.

Lasting six to 12 months, this type of coaching involves a close, intimate relationship between the executive and the coach. The data collection and analysis phase are in-depth, usually involving the coach conducting face-to-face interviews with all of the executive's staff, peers, manager, and, in some cases, customers, suppliers, and family members. Multiple assessment instruments, such as 360 Competency Assessment, Myers-Briggs, and Firo-B are often used to supplement the interviews. Sometimes the coach will observe, or "shadow," the executive at work in meetings, making presentations, and so forth. The observation can be part of the data-collection phase, continued development, and feedback support as the executive implements his or her development plan.

Once the data has been collected, the coach meets with the executive to analyze the results. That's usually an intensive feedback session lasting up to two days. Then, the executive and the coach create a draft development plan, which the executive usually shares with his or her manager to obtain input. The next phase is implementing the development plan, with the coach still closely involved. At minimum, the coach meets with the executive at least once a month for two to four hours to assess progress, discuss roadblocks, and offer support. In some cases, the coach will continue to observe the executive in various interactions and provide on-the-spot feedback. The coach usually continues to work with the executive until the development plan has been completely implemented and the executive has improved or enhanced the targeted competencies.

Content coaching.

The time this stage takes depends on the issues involved. This type of coaching involves providing leaders with knowledge and skills in a specific content area. An example might be a leader who needs to know more about global marketing, finance, or operations in a specific industry. Another example might be a leader who needs to improve presentation skills or learn how to prepare to meet with stock analysts. Content coaches are experts in a specific discipline, and they're brought in to meet with an executive in a series of sessions to ensure that the executive develops the necessary knowledge and skills in that area. The coaching can include having the executive read books or articles and debrief with the coach, conducting role plays, and being videotaped. The timeframe depends on the executive's skill level and what it needs to be. The first coaching session is often an assessment of the executive's skill and knowledge level. Then, a learning plan is documented with a timeline and activities to achieve the desired

outcome. Some organizations prefer to send executives to external seminars to obtain the needed skills or knowledge. But with chaotic management schedules or an accelerated timeframe, one-on-one executive coaching makes more sense--especially if you can obtain a coach who is considered to be a world-class expert in the specific content.

Real Life Executive Coaching

An international Fortune 100 electronics firm implemented an in-depth developmental coaching process for its top 60 executives. Each executive was assigned a private coach to work with over a period of one year. The process began with a battery of psychological assessments and a 360 interview process, in which the coach personally interviewed the executives' staff, peers, and managers. The executives were assessed on how well they demonstrate company values. After compiling the data, the coach spent one to two days reviewing results with executives and drafting development plans, which they shared with their managers to get additional input. The coach continued to meet with each executive for two hours each month to assess progress, assist with issues and roadblocks, and celebrate successes. The emphasis was on helping the executives demonstrate the leadership values and philosophy of the company. In some instances, the coach shadowed an executive, depending on the development issues. At six and 12 months, the executives were reassessed on the values. If progress was not seen, an executive could be reassigned (this was communicated to the executives at the beginning of the process). This type of coaching is used to help executives develop the skills, knowledge, or attitudes to support the leadership values and philosophy of their company and to shift corporate culture.

Possible Coaching Scenarios

Company A --timeframe one month

1. Leader completes 360 instrument.
2. 1st coaching session: 360 data-analysis and development-planning sessions (one to four hours)
3. 2nd coaching session (one month later): Follow-up discussion to assess progress and roadblocks and to give encouragement (one to two hours)

Company B--timeframe three months

1. Leader completes 360 instrument.
2. 1st coaching session: 360 data-analysis and development-planning sessions (one to four hours)
3. Telephone coaching sessions every two to four weeks to assess progress and roadblocks and to give encouragement (30 to 60 minutes)
4. Three-month mini assessment on development areas to assess whether progress was made; use ROI measure.
5. Final coaching session: Debrief mini assessment, update development plan, offer encouragement.

Company C--timeframe six months

1. Leader completes 360 instrument.
2. 1st coaching session: 360 data-analysis and development-planning sessions (one to four hours)
3. Coaching sessions every one to two months for five months to assess progress and roadblocks and to give encouragement (one hour)
4. Six-month mini assessment on development areas to assess whether progress was made; use ROI measure.
5. Final coaching session: Debrief mini assessment; update development plan, offer encouragement.

Real Life Executive Coaching

A hospital in the U.S. Midwest implemented a content coaching process for doctors to help them develop skills and knowledge about hospital finances. Each doctor completed an assessment to determine his or her current level of financial knowledge and then was assigned a private coach who was an expert in hospital finance. The coach worked with each doctor individually and customized the coaching sessions to meet the doctors' specific development needs in the finance area. Some coaching sessions were longer than others; some used different learning approaches, based on a doctor's learning style. At the end of six months, each doctor was reassessed on his or her finance skills and knowledge.

Benefits and pitfalls

Executive coaching has many advantages, but it's not without risks. Talk with anyone who has implemented a coaching process and they'll have at least one bad story to tell--generally about matching an executive with the wrong coach.

The benefits we've seen in our experience and in talking with others who have implemented executive coaching include positive behavior change and enhanced skills and knowledge.

Most leaders like executive coaching because

- they receive direct one-on-one assistance from someone they respect
- they don't have to leave their offices
- it fits their timeframes and schedules
- they can see fast results, if they're dedicated.

The ROI with executive coaching is often very high--especially if you calculate the value of a high-level executive salary and the return-on-improvement in skill level and decision making.

It has been reported that stress levels and burnout drop with some executive coaching, because executives have an objective third party they can talk to confidentially about work-life balance issues, thus increasing their support network. Employee satisfaction often goes up as leaders recognize the investment their company is making in them to provide personal development coaching.

Executive coaching is a good strategy for fast-paced or start-up companies that don't have more traditional leadership development programs in place.

The pitfalls include

- not integrating executive coaching with the rest of your leadership development strategy
- not getting the buy-in of executives to participate in coaching
- not being clear on the type of coach you need
- not checking a coach's references (use your personal network and word-of-mouth, and personally interview each coach)
- selecting and matching the wrong coach with a leader.

Beware of coaches who

- have no industry experience (for example, a psychological background only)
- insist on using their own coaching model, assessment instruments, and so forth instead of using yours or integrating it with theirs
- have done only outplacement work (they might "coach" your executives to leave)
- take credit for past coaching results--such as, "I fixed this guy"
- use a strictly counseling approach (coaching is not counseling). Coaches need to provide specific and practical suggestions for skill enhancement.

Real Life Executive Coaching

A Fortune 200 telecommunications company implemented a feedback coaching process, in which executives completed a customized 360-leadership competency assessment and were assigned to work with a feedback coach for six months. The coach met with the executives four times in the six-month period. The first meeting was to analyze the 360-feedback report with the executives and identify one strength and two to three areas for improvement. They then drafted a development plan, which the executive shared with their managers to obtain additional input. The second coaching session occurred one month later, in which each executive and the coach discussed how well the conversation went with their managers and to finalize the development plan, including detailed action items with deadlines. At two months, a reminder letter was sent to the executives to continue progress. At three months, the coach and executives met again one-on-one to discuss issues, roadblocks, successes, and so forth. At four months, a second reminder letter was sent. At five months, a mini 360 fax survey (with the two to three improvement areas) was distributed to obtain follow-up data. At six months, the coach and each executive met for the last official time to review the mini survey results and assess progress. The executives had the option to continue the coaching, but they had to pay for it from their own departments. The complete six-month process was funded by the organization and is repeated every 12 to 18 months for top executives.

Real Life Executive coaching

An international Fortune 100 computer company implemented a feedback coaching process, accelerating it to be completed in three months rather than six. The rationale is that employees change jobs quickly and, with changes in technology and business issues, many rotate to new positions or projects, making it difficult to complete the mini survey for follow-up purposes. The process was the same as described in the case of the Fortune 200 telecommunications company--with the exception that at three months, the mini fax survey was distributed and the coach met with the executives after the results were tabulated to assess progress and determine the next steps such as continued coaching, additional work on implementing development plans, and so forth.

Making a good match

Executive coaching should be integrated into the rest of your leadership development strategy. Depending on what you're already implemented, executive coaching can be one more option for specific situations, such as content and in-depth development coaching. Or it can be the heart of your strategy. For example, if you have a 360 leadership assessment, you may decide to use that combined with feedback coaching as your core process. Then, all development plans coming out of the coaching sessions determine the other types of development activities you offer, such as classroom training, self-study, job rotation, community learning, and so forth. It's important that you're clear about where executive coaching fits into your overall development strategy before you begin recruiting coaches.

Identifying coaches

Attend any meeting of executive development professionals and you'll hear the same lament, "Where do we find good executive coaches?" The best answer is to use your personal network of associates. Word of mouth can identify the finest coaches. Just make sure you ask what type of coaching (feedback, in-depth development, or content) took place and what the coach's philosophy, style, and results were. Then, determine whether that coach would work well in your corporate culture. In addition, there are several organizations for finding executive coaches, with new ones springing up every day (see the sidebar, Executive Coaching Suppliers).

Selecting coaches

Obviously, you need to identify your own selection criteria, but we've listed a few that we think are important.

- Must have experience coaching executives (ask how many).
- Must have experience using and debriefing multiple 360 instruments (ask which ones).
- Must understand the corporate environment (ideally, have worked in the same industry).
- Must know development (can suggest practical, effective actions for improvement).
- Must be tough and confrontational in a supportive way.
- Must respect and support confidentiality.

Coaches can report to HR on retention and similar issues, but most discussions between coach and executive should be confidential (which is different from evaluative coaching).

When you interview a potential coach, ask him or her to describe past experience in coaching executives. The best coaches exhibit a combination of empathy and toughness, are practical, are interested in helping people do better, and are sure of who they are as people. They also believe there's a lot of work out there for executive coaching and aren't competitive with other coaches.

The cost for an executive coach depends on the type and length of the coaching. Telephone feedback coaching is generally the least expensive; in-depth development coaching is usually the most costly. Content coaching fees vary, depending on the coach. If you're bringing in a world-class expert, that can cost more than in-depth development coaching.

Once you're clear on the strategy and process, document both so you can explain them to the coaches and the leaders. Start small with a few executives, then follow up to see how it's going (there's usually no such thing as a pilot in executive development). If there's a lack of chemistry between a leader and a

coach, be willing to switch coaches immediately. Then, give the coach feedback so you can continue your partnership with him or her.

Always hold an orientation session so the coach or coaches are clear about the objectives and desired outcome. The orientation should include

- strategy and context of why you're conducting executive coaching
- how it fits into overall leadership development
- company vision, mission, strategy, values, locations,
- products, customers, competitors, and other important
- organizational issues (to provide context and credibility)
- information on the 360 assessment you're using--how it was developed, the format, meaning, and so forth
- the coaching process and model you want them to follow--what to emphasize, forms to complete, follow-up,
- ethics
- a caveat about confidentiality.

In addition, set the ground rules for the contract. If an executive has a positive experience with a coach, the executive will likely invite the coach back to do other work, such as teambuilding or process improvement. It's important that you clarify that contracting situation with the coach up front. A good rule is to ask the coach to clear through you any additional requests for business. Then, create a new contract.

The Executive Coach's Perspective

From an executive coach's perspective, there are several elements that he or she needs to be the most effective. All of these elements might not be present in every situation, but each can raise the probability that the coaching will yield the desired outcome. Accountability. This helps the executive maintain a consistent focus, and it sets expectations for desired outcomes. If there's an identified development process outlined for the organization, the leaders should be held accountable for following through on that process. HR professionals can support the coach's efforts, but the primary responsibility is on the immediate manager. Most people begin a development effort with good intentions, but it takes a lot of self-discipline to stay with it, and self-discipline is generally not enough. The manager must inspect the process and support it in a constructive way on a continuing basis.

Integration with other systems. This weaves development into the cultural fabric of organization life. The development process should be integrated into and supported by other HR systems such as career planning, succession planning, and performance planning. The pieces build momentum for each other, and duplicate effort is avoided. For example, if the development plan becomes a part of the performance plan, then it's more likely that the manager will be involved actively in the process.

Top management modeling. This is one of the best ways people learn. Key leaders in any organization define or redefine the culture. If you want to build a culture that defines development as a continuous process, then have the key leaders model the behavior. If they only preach development, then don't expect much to happen in the general population of leaders. If top leaders "walk the talk," others will follow and accountability happens more naturally. Leaders can say, "I work continuously at getting better, and I expect you to do the same."

Confidentiality. The coach-client privilege is a critical element of the process. The coach must be viewed by the client-leader as a trusted confidante. A manager should never ask a coach to break that confidential relationship. If asked, a coach should refuse. There are times when a coach knows information that, if divulged, would work for the overall good, including the client-leader. But to break confidentiality would undermine the entire coaching process and would almost never justify the gain.

In addition to those important elements, it always helps to update the coach on your particular business strategy, any changes in direction, or other important organizational happenings that may affect the coaching process. For example, if downsizing is going on or if the company is implementing a new global marketing plan, it's useful for the coach to know that in advance so that he or she can be aware of the impact on the leaders being coached.

Last, most coaches report that the long-term coaching relationships in which they get to meet with a leader over several months (verses a one-shot feedback session) achieves the best results. They're there for an extended time to encourage the leader and to ensure that he or she develops the desired competencies. Many executive coaches say that such long-term relationships are also personally rewarding because they get to witness the positive changes.