

EXECUTIVE COACHING: MAXIMIZING LEADERSHIP GIFTS FOR THE LONG TERM

The best coaching doesn't produce just short-term results - it helps clients develop the skills necessary for the long-term transformation that will allow them to continue their growth as leaders long after the coaching relationship ends.

Sophisticated behavior change that is sustainable and dependable under stress requires - among other things - consistent encouragement, practice, and feedback. High-level behavior changes also need time to develop, time to be tested in action, and time to be refined.

The final ingredient needed to develop the kinds of behavior we want in our business leaders is a little more elusive to define, but no less essential. It is hope.

We hope that the new behavior, the new strategy, the new operating mode, the new idea will actually work. We hope that change is possible. We hope that our struggle to change will bring self-improvement, measurable business results, and more financial and/or personal success. There's really a lot of hope involved, and coaches are in a unique position to bring hope to their clients.

Key Change Factors

The most rapid behavior change occurs when the following key factors are present:

- MOTIVATION to change
- ACTION taken to effect change
- PRACTICE opportunities in real-world settings
- FEEDBACK that is trusted and accurate
- TIME for new habits to develop
- Skilled help in recognizing and OVERCOMING RESISTANCE to change

A quality executive coaching relationship will encourage or provide all of these key factors. In addition, there are a unique set of perspectives that distinguish coaching from other methods of individual or organizational behavior change and make it invaluable for leadership development. They are:

- Clients are powerful, capable, and responsible for their actions and the resulting consequences.
- Clients have wisdom and knowledge that needs to be accessed and utilized.
- Clients transform through the coaching relationship.
- Clients (the WHO) are more important than the WHAT or the HOW.
- Clients want and need hope!

Let's take a look at each of these perspectives.

Clients are powerful, capable and responsible for their actions and the resulting consequences.

I often work with leaders who begin our work by blaming all their misfortune on outside forces - their particular situation, their people, their stress - on any and everything except their own behavior.

We can't really do any useful work together until they understand, and accept responsibility for, the tremendous power they have to influence people and events around them.

Recently I worked with three owners of a regional telephone and data network installer during an off-site strategic planning session. One of their common frustrations was their inability to hold any meetings in their own conference room without being interrupted by their own staff. The interruption was typically an urgent

plea to handle a client emergency. This happened even after they'd told their staff not to disturb them. When I asked how they handled those interruptions, they told me that they'd always go and handle the "urgent" client problem. We then had a long talk about the various ways they were supporting and actually encouraging their staff to interrupt them and depend on them in unproductive ways. Once they were able to see their part in the interaction - that they were actually responsible for those frustrating interruptions - they also realized that they held the power to change their behavior in order to communicate that they really wouldn't accept interruptions.

The key here was a willingness to accept responsibility for their actions and the unintended consequences produced from their sincere desire to be responsive to their clients.

Clients have wisdom and knowledge that needs to be accessed and utilized.

Producing the best results requires accessing the knowledge and wisdom of our clients. Good consultants provide expertise, answers, relevant management theories, and program implementation plans to solve particular business problems. Good coaches bring thought-provoking questions, personal exercises, and real-world assignments, all designed to help leaders discover and maximize their own unique gifts and talents.

Coaching develops extraordinary leaders. Extraordinary leaders produce extraordinary business results.

Clients transform through the coaching relationship.

Clearly, both client and coach have particular roles in the coaching partnership. But the unique power for producing dramatic results comes from the ongoing, consistent communication, authenticity, accountability, feedback, and reflection that are part of any good coaching relationship.

Coaches are not in business to create or foster dependency, but rather to help clients develop skills of self-observation, self-awareness, self-responsibility, and self-mastery. These skills allow clients to continue their growth as leaders long after the coaching relationship ends. Ironically, our goal is to help our clients develop to the point where we're no longer needed.

For example, John was struggling with his inability to turn around an extremely negative atmosphere that had developed at his company. He owned a midsize manufacturing company that had made some poor hiring decisions for its sales team. This resulted in an extended period of low morale and deteriorating staff effectiveness throughout the company. They'd just experienced their first quarterly loss in eight years. This situation had been festering for over a year when John called for help.

In addition to coaching John on various strategies and action steps, we focused lots of attention on the power of his personal influence. You see, one thing that was not obvious to John - but obvious to everyone around him - was his powerful and influential presence.

When he was powerfully positive, so was everyone around him. When he was in a bad mood, everyone suffered along. During the past year, John and his people had created a powerfully negative environment together.

In our second coaching session, I asked John to take a moment at the end of each day and notice whether his attitude had been mostly positive or negative that day. He'd simply mark "+" or "-" on his calendar. His own attitude-tracking, plus our coaching conversations, helped John clearly see the connection between his mood and the performance of those around him.

This self-awareness transformed John into his own "attitude monitor." He began to quickly notice when he was losing his positive perspective, and together we developed a number of strategies to help him recover his positive influence.

Monitoring and changing John's attitude may not appear to be a major business success, but it has radically transformed the environment at his company and the effectiveness of his staff. In fact, during the first three months of our coaching, the company returned to profitability - during an economic downturn.

More important, John changed. He became self-aware and self-responsible for the attitude he brings to his leadership.

Clients (the WHO) are more important than the WHAT or the HOW.

Consulting tends to focus on discovering the WHAT of a situation: "What's the problem?" "What's going on in this situation?" "What's the program, process, or procedure that will solve the problem?" The next step is often focused on teaching people the HOW: "How do we remedy the identified problem?" This involves some form of training program to teach new skills, or implementing some new program, product, or management strategy.

Coaching is different, because it specializes in integrating the vital WHO perspective: "Who is this leader and how do their unique skills and talents produce results most effectively for their organization?"

If the most brilliant business strategy isn't a good fit for the leader who needs to implement it, it will often fail. Not because it wasn't brilliant, not because it wouldn't have worked somewhere else, but simply because it didn't take into account who was going to lead and who was going to carry it out.

Clients want and need hope!

Hope in the coaching relationship involves an unwavering commitment to the extraordinary potential we each have for growth and development. We have hope that positive expectation and ongoing support can produce dramatic and rapid change. We have hope that leaders can improve, that people can change, that positive expectations, support, and guidance do contribute to producing exceptional corporate leaders. We have hope that leaders can develop richly satisfying lives, both inside and outside of work. In fact, if I had to choose one perspective that was most critical to coaching success, it would be a commitment to hope.

Bringing Hope to Clients

Vaclav Havel, the former Czech president and playwright, added a wonderful richness to the definition of hope when he said:

"Hope is a feeling that life and work have meaning. You either have it or you don't, regardless of the state of the world that surrounds you."

The best coaches I know have this feeling. They model it in their own lives, and one of their primary responsibilities is to consistently bring it to their clients - regardless of the state of the client's world.

It's my view that this perspective of hope and commitment to expanding human potential places coaching at the forefront of successful executive development and organizational change efforts.

Does this mean that every coaching client will take on the challenge to change or that they'll all produce extraordinary results? Nope. What it means is that executive coaching is best considered and used as a way to develop and expand potential, not as a remedial program to "fix" damaged leaders.

When done well - and with a healthy dose of hope - executive coaching is the ultimate, results-oriented, leadership development program.

by Ken Kesslin