

A Strategic Coach

Having a coach isn't just for executives. Here's how a coach makes sense for you.

By Barry Zweibel

I LIKE THE ASTD discussion boards. They provide training and development professionals who are scattered across the globe a place to gather, ask questions, and share ideas. In a recent thread, someone asked if an external coach might be a good way to help an employee deal with not receiving a promotion. Excellent, I thought—more and more coaching is becoming a top-of-mind option.

The next post caught me by surprise. It suggested that a coach should be considered “only for extremely senior roles,” such as a CEO candidate who didn't get the job. While many valid reasons exist for not enlisting the help of a coach, job status isn't one of them. In fact, hiring a coach—with or without company sponsorship—can be one of the more strategically savvy moves an employee at any level can make.

Coaching is not ...

When speaking with people who aren't familiar with the concept of coaching, I find that they often base their views on several misconceptions. To clarify, let's make a distinction between business coaching and the “Extreme Makeover,” Dr. Phil-type life coaching you see on TV.

Business coaching, also called executive coaching, management coaching, and leadership coaching, requires no plastic surgery. It doesn't necessitate that you quit your job, divorce your spouse, or move to a foreign land. Here's a list of other things coaching is not:

Not a replacement for training. Coaching is an adjunct to training, not a substitute for it. Coaching, which occurs on an ongoing basis—usually weekly or biweekly, continues over the course of several months. As such, coaching readily reinforces the lessons learned from training through the structure and follow-up inherent in the overall process.

Not therapy. Most people who hire business coaches are already quite successful or well on their way to becoming so. Organizations that sponsor coaches for

employees typically see those employees as high performers or contributors who have the potential to be a “HiPo” with a little extra care.

Not just pleasant chitchat. Give extended attention to a topic of interest, and an invigorating intensity naturally develops. Although coaching conversations can be quite animated, a coach's job is to facilitate deep learning and lasting change. The good moods and high spirits that typically result are value-added byproducts.

Not about giving answers. Coaching is about asking questions that will support the discovery of answers. It's about helping a person learn to communicate better with herself so that she doesn't always need the coach. It's about helping people naturally work harder and smarter so that they can maximize the value they provide to their employer, their co-workers, the customers they serve, and themselves.

Coaching is ...

The Worldwide Association of Business Coaches, an international professional association dedicated to the business coaching industry, defines business coaching as “a highly interactive partnership for the purpose of reaching professional and personal goals and objectives within the context of the business's or organization's goals and objectives.”

Newsweek magazine describes a business coach as, “Part consultant, part motivational speaker ... coaches work with managers, entrepreneurs, and just plain folks, helping them define and achieve their goals.” *The Harvard Business Review* notes that “[t]he goal of coaching is the goal of good management—to make the most of an organization's valuable resources.” Anyone who hasn't been “made the most of” is ripe for experiencing the benefits of working with a business coach.

But, how does coaching work?

All about focus

FOCUS serves as an excellent acronym for how a business coach can help you—or an employee of your company—bet-

ter achieve professional and personal goals.

F: Face it. People too often sell themselves short in business by avoiding what they don't know how to do. It's a natural tendency, but one that makes you increasingly averse to risk. Coaching allows you to learn new skills in a safe, supportive, and confidential way. So when you're given a new assignment or seemingly impossible challenge, you have the confidence and resolve to face it head-on.

O: Openminded. The traits that made you successful are often what keep you from continued success. Attention to detail may have solidified your reputation, but it may now be what's stopping you from improving your delegation skills. Your natural ability to work independently may have helped you achieve recognition in the past, yet now it's undermining your efforts to become a better team player. A coach helps you recognize your default behaviors and augment your success strategy to be more appropriate for your current challenges.

C: Choices. A coach challenges you to reconsider previously discounted possibilities and to develop new ones. Using thought-provoking questions, comments, role-playing, and a variety of other techniques, a coach helps you break out of the rut of indecision.

U: Unambiguous movement. In business, it's about making progress happen. As such, your professional success is determined by your ability to make good things happen sooner—or not. Getting a clear vision of what you want to do, how you're going to do it, and when you're going to get it done is why working with a business coach makes sense. It's about your future success.

S: Solidifying learning. Sure, you've made mistakes; it's what you learn (or don't learn) from those mistakes that matters most. That same theory holds true for your successes. What enabled them to happen? What would have facilitated things further? What do you want to try next? A business coach will ask you those questions and others like them. It may sound counterintuitive, but hindsight is a great planning tool. By looking back at the challenges you've faced and

How to Choose a Coach

Here's a simple four-step process to follow when choosing your coach.

Step 1: Get clear about your “what” and “how.” The clearer you are about what you want to achieve, the easier it will be for you to work on those topics with a coach. Similarly, the more clearly you understand how you want to achieve your “what,” the more effective the coaching process can be.

- Do you want to boldly go where no one has gone before, follow a proven path, or somewhere in-between?
- Do you want someone to track your assignments, hold you accountable, evaluate your deliverables, help you brainstorm, or something different entirely?
- Do you want your coach to be more like a drill sergeant, a cheerleader, or Yoda, the Jedi Master?

Step 2: Create a short list. Using Internet keywords such as executive coach, management coach, life coach, and so forth, check www.google.com or www.yahoo.com for coaches' Websites that appeal to you. Review the list of coaches certified by the International Coach Federation. Or review the member directory of the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches.

Step 3: Interview each coach. Screen coaches further based on the relevancy of their coaching experience, pre-coaching backgrounds, current coaching credentials, and commitment to coaching, as demonstrated by having a full-time practice.

Ask for a free, no-strings-attached sample session, so you can experience their coaching styles first-hand.

Step 4: Look for the CLICK between you and each coach.

C: Contribution. How much did each coach contribute to meaningfully addressing the issue you brought to the call?

L: Listening. How well did each coach really hear you? What new things did you hear yourself say?

I: Intensity. What kind of energy did you feel after each conversation? How motivated were you by what was said?

C: Connection. How comfortable were you in sharing your thoughts and feelings with each coach? What kind of rapport developed?

K: “Kreativity.” What did you enjoy about each coach? Who could you imagine working with on an ongoing basis?

Although higher fees don't always mean better service, should you click with a coach—someone who helps you think smarter, feel better, and act sooner—don't let a few extra dollars get in the way of moving you from where you are now to where you want to be. Make yourself a priority.

GoTo/ [ASTD Discussion Boards, http://community.astd.org](http://community.astd.org)

MORE

- **The Worldwide Association of Business Coaches, www.wabccoaches.com**
- **International Coach Federation, www.coachfederation.org/credentialing/coaches/coaches.asp**
- **“Need a Life? Get a Coach,” by Kendall Hamilton. *Newsweek*, February 5, 1996.**
- **“The Executive as Coach,” by James Waldroop and Timothy Butler. *Harvard Business Review*, November 1, 1996.**

the lessons inherent in them, you can't help but be smarter and more capable moving forward.

The work you put in your hours

Sam Ewing was quoted as saying, "It's not the hours you put in your work that counts, it's the work you put in the hours." Logistically speaking, I conduct my coaching conversations by phone, and they run between 45 minutes to an hour. The process I follow generally looks like the diagram above.

While a number of insights occur during each call, the real growth and development happens between calls. Each coaching conversation typically includes a few homework assignments to further action and discovery. Those assignments usually take one or more of the following forms:

To-dos. Based on the particulars of the conversation, to-dos are obviously needed work items. If, for example, the topic is improving your collaboration skills, a to-do would be to schedule coffee breaks with three to five people you need to get to know better.

Observations. Similar to to-dos, observations are more about the process than the actual outcome. A relevant observation would be to pay particular attention to the kind of impact you have on people, the kind of impact they have on you, and the extent to which they realize those impacts. (FYI: This is a great exercise for building self-confidence.)

Thought questions. While to-dos are about the doing, and observations are a combination of doing and reflecting, thought questions are solely about reflection. A relevant assignment would be to consider what collaboration means with respect to responsibility and accountability.

Coaching's strategic benefits

In May of 2004, the University of Chicago hosted its 52nd annual management conference. A major theme: It's not enough to do good work.

"Reputations flourish not simply because you do good work, but because people tell stories about your good work," reported Ronald Burt, professor of sociology and strategy. Simply put, the more



people talk about what you do well, the better your performance reviews—and raises and bonuses—will tend to be. That's especially true when others talk about your good work to people in different parts of the company. It seems that when that type of information crosses department boundaries, it's seen as significantly more credible and newsworthy, naturally boosting your reputation.

A coach helps you approach that challenge more strategically than you might alone. Here are a few examples of how:

- By creating a customized networking plan, a coach helps you connect more regularly and comfortably with key people across the organization.
- By being your confidant and independent sounding board, a coach makes you more aware of your opinions of others and helps you hear what you may be saying to them without realizing it.
- Through logic and common sense, a coach guides you to think through and analyze the steps you take and the decisions you make in determining the merits of a particular course of action.
- In reviewing your insights and observations from the week, a coach works with you to frame where you're at, see what's in your way, and crystallize how you should move forward.

Executives—especially the more successful ones—know that such analyses pay real dividends in terms of how they're perceived, the level of support they receive, and the results they ultimately achieve.

But executives aren't the only ones who can benefit from taking a more strategic approach to their work. Imagine

what you could create if you were just that much more valued by key decision makers. Imagine what you could accomplish if you were listened to just a little more closely by those around you. Imagine the impact you could have if you were able to be just that much more influential.

It won't happen overnight. But one thing is clear: You need to put the proper focus, structures, and accountabilities in place in order for such improvements to happen. Coaching is a process that does exactly that.

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