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Things That Get in the Way of Executive Coaching

Too many executives receive poor or no coaching. They miss opportunities to become more effective in their positions of influence and are often denied promotions they deserve.

Some leaders struggle in their careers, failing to recognize that hiring an executive coach can help them enormously. It's the right tool to alleviate common leadership problems, but executives frequently don't take advantage of it. They don't know how to get the most from coaching to improve their performance and enhance their career growth.

While hiring the wrong coach can be a waste of time and money, hiring the right coach can also be wasteful if the executive isn't fully engaged in the process. As an executive, you can get more out of coaching when you are fully informed about things that can get in the way of your progress.

What is Executive Coaching

Close to **60%**
of US corporations
employ coaches.

Approximately
10,000 are
practicing today.

Broadly defined, executive coaching is a one-on-one consulting relationship dedicated to improving high-level managers' leadership capabilities and performance. It's a uniquely effective developmental approach that has become increasingly popular in U.S. corporations.

Hiring decisions have evolved from seeking help to handle "problem people" to bona fide status symbol for the enlightened or high-potential leader.

Coaching helps conquer ingrained leadership behaviors in ways that few other developmental approaches can muster. Senior executives value the privacy the experience affords, while managers appreciate learning how to coach their reports.

The quality of the relationship between manager and employee is a major predictor of the latter's intentions to remain in an organization. Coaching helps managers talk with subordinates about their needs, leading to a big payoff in developing positive re-



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- ▶ **Strategy** -- Coaching for executives to define and execute a business master plan that drives results that are predicable and sustainable.

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relationships. Thus, coaching has a trickle-down effect throughout the organization.

Risky Business

Despite the explosion in coaching services, working with coaches can be risky. There are no generally accepted standards for membership in the profession. A few organizations purport to screen and train coaches, but their authority is not universally accepted.

Many of the great executive coaches lack official credentials or membership in a trade organization. Many come from related fields like psychology, human resources or management. And there are experienced coaches, with good track records, who come from sports, real estate and unorthodox backgrounds.

Apparently, good coaches without credentials abound, as do bad ones with good credentials. This makes it difficult to know how to choose the right coach. The most serious consequences from engaging an ineffective coach range from wasting money and time to damaging careers. This lack of clear standards for a popular profession, whose practitioners earn impressive fees, has been discussed in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Fast Company* and *Fortune*.

Despite concerns, however, a common discipline does exist and has been evolving for more than 25 years. Executives are now forewarned: To get the most from coaching, you must be an informed partner.

The Coaching Partnership

The more you know about what goes on in the coaching process, the better you'll be able to make a good choice of coach, and the more you'll be an active participant in your coaching goals.

When executives truly understand what's involved in creating lasting change and new behaviors, they're well on their way to success, no matter the quality of the coach. In the final analysis, a leader—not the coach—is responsible for making change happen.

The Road to Enlightenment

Executive coaching is designed to effect sustained behavioral changes to improve performance. To achieve this goal, the coaching program must deliver on these prerequisites:

▶ 1. Provide insight into your leadership behavior and style

You must have a clear understanding of your current behaviors and of how colleagues perceive you. This is the first step, and it often creates difficulties.

Executives often assume their current approach is the right one and are blind to its downside. You aren't likely to change if you embrace this idea. You must request feedback on the effects of your style and actions. While this may be difficult to hear or fully appreciate, your coach can facilitate the feedback process.

▶ 2. Clarify your purpose and interests

One of coaching's basic premises is that the way you lead is intimately connected to who you are as a person.

To improve your leadership skills, you must bolster your integrity by strengthening the connections between your inner self and your external actions.

▶ 3. Improve interpersonal relationships

This is as vital to coaching's success as is improving performance. People's previous experiences with you and their preexisting judgments should be addressed.

Involving colleagues in your development process can help change their perceptions of you. In turn, this will make it easier for you to alter patterns of interaction with them. This step, however, is far from easy, and it requires courage coupled with attuned coaching.

4. Broaden your perspective

Executives succeed because of their strong abilities to conceptualize and think strategically, but they can sometimes become too attached to being right.

In most real-life situations, there are multiple correct answers. The ability to see and understand increasing complexity is essential. Coaching helps develop this perspective.

What You Need to Know

As an active participant in the coaching process, you are required to:

- ▶ Understand executive coaching, what it can accomplish and its limitations
- ▶ Realize why specific strategies are necessary to overcome special barriers to executive development
- ▶ Decide whether and how coaching is likely to help you become more effective
- ▶ Discover how to assess potential coaches and choose the best fit for your particular needs
- ▶ Recognize the critical steps in the coaching process and learn how to manage them with the aid of your coach
- ▶ Learn not only how coaching can help you change your own behavior, but also how it can help you influence colleagues to perceive you in the way you want to be perceived

▶ 5. Develop new leadership skills

What are the key activities in a new role? Where should a newly appointed leader focus attention and energy? A skilled coach can help with role expectations and skills-building.

▶ 6. Identify and overcome barriers to change

Change should occur over time, with implementation assistance from your coach. A coach helps you practice new behaviors in ways that gradually build skills.

You and your coach will encounter resistance and denial, especially when dealing with ingrained habits. Many behaviors have served as strengths in the past, but they now hinder you. New behaviors often feel difficult and uncomfortable. It's up to you to develop awareness of personality roadblocks that trap you in old patterns.

▶ 7. Improve your ability to learn

One of coaching's most important goals is to teach you to internalize the ability to question, learn and continually grow. You must be able to modify your style and behavior as situations demand.

This involves learning to step back, identify your and others' interests, and choose actions that will satisfy most. You must reflect on your actions and their effects, seeking others' feedback about your impact and modifying subsequent actions on the basis of this information.

Boulders Along the Road

Attending a leadership-development training program or receiving feedback from a survey won't create real, sustainable improvement. Executives face other unique challenges when it comes to change:

- ▶ Executive positions are complicated by power and pressures.
- ▶ The type of person who seeks and achieves a high-level position is often hard-driving, highly confident, and not reflective or introspective.

These are significant barriers, even though executives may say they're motivated to change. But change isn't easy. And for highly successful people, it's even harder to see how and why to change.

Here are five key potential hurdles to developing executives and convincing them to change their behaviors:

▶ 1. Lack of authentic feedback

The more authority you have, the less likely you are to seek and receive authentic feedback. You may present an air of confidence and dominance that discourages meaningful interactions.

In addition, you may think others are judging you, prompting you to become cautious about what you say and do. This increases distance in relationships, which minimizes opportunities for useful feedback.

Finally, you may have isolated yourself from others by relying on a select group of trusted advisors who protect you from distractions and annoyances.

▶ 2. Lack of time or value placed on reflection

Most executives face enormous, continuous and widely varying demands on their time. The likelihood of having time to reflect on behavior is minimal. Furthermore, it's not in the nature of most hard-driving, results-oriented personalities to be introspective.

▶ 3. Reluctance to reveal weaknesses to others

This is a major barrier to getting leaders to change. They strive to continually project an aura of confidence and competence.

Complicating matters, the organization and your peers may discourage you from appearing vulnerable. Demonstrating your weaknesses to outsiders, they reason, can have a detrimental effect on investors' confidence.

▶ 4. Reluctance to acknowledge weaknesses to oneself

Not only will executives avoid letting others see their vulnerabilities, but they will also steer clear of acknowledging them internally. It can be scary to think you may be wrong.

When your behaviors lead to positive business results, you may rationalize weaknesses in interpersonal style. If it's not broken, you may think, why fix it? But what works for you today may not carry you through tomorrow. Denial works for only so long before complexity, stress and challenges take their toll.

▶ 5. Fear of letting go of a previously successful style

If your leadership style has been working just fine for a few years, you may fear that modifying it puts your effectiveness at risk. But in the words of accomplished executive coach Marshall Goldsmith, "What got you here won't get you there."

No coach, no matter how talented, can effect change and development in a leader who fails to understand how barriers can sabotage one's efforts.

When executives agree to change and improve, coaching works. When they see themselves as responsible for making change, coaching once again works. *The return on investment for organizations is exponential.*

How Coaching Addresses the Challenges of Executive Change

1. Procure and provide authentic feedback:

- » Ensure a confidential setting
- » Use specific descriptions of behavior

2. Make the benefits of behavioral change compelling:

- » Reveal how behavior conflicts with values
- » Reveal how behavior impedes desired outcomes

3. Design a path to behavioral change:

- » Suggest behaviors that will support desired outcomes
- » Create scripts that put new behaviors and dialogue into action

4. Ensure privacy:

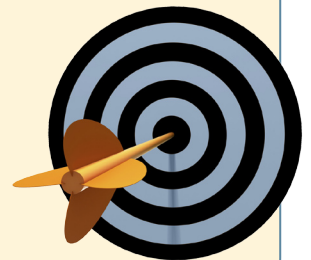
- » Create confidential space to discuss weaknesses and practice skills
- » Gradually expand efforts to riskier areas and relationships

5. Involve others:

- » Share information about developmental efforts
- » Enlist colleagues' feedback and support

6. Link training to real-life challenges:

- » Tailor skills to the executive's individual style
- » Get the executive to apply skills to daily work



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