EXECUTIVE COACHING THAT WINS

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
When it comes to organizational development activities today, particularly those like leadership and/or strategic development, it is quite clear that executive coaching is the "neutron bomb." As executives and HR managers know, coaching is the most potent tool for inducing positive personal change, ensuring better-than-average odds for success and making the change stick for the long term.

A review of the data coming in from recent publicly available evaluations tells the story.

For example, consulting firm Personnel Decisions Inc. (1999) has shown that executive coaching programs are twice as effective as behaviour modelling (the previous winner) and three times more effective than multitechnique programs. The latter used to be the state of the art and still is the mainstay of programs delivered by many quality training vendors. In addition, participants most frequently rate their experience with executive coaching as "very satisfactory." (Hall, Douglas T., Otazo, Karen L., Hollenback, George P., Behind Closed Doors, Organizational Dynamics, Winter, 1999.)

Each set of positive findings encourages many people to climb on the executive coaching bandwagon. This groundswell has made coaching the fastest-growing area among consulting companies and solo practitioners. In certain circles, it is now "cool" to have a coach. There even appears to be shortages of good coaches. (Hicks, Mary Dee. Special Report on Training and Development. American Management Association, February, 1999.)

Before we get too caught up in the hype, it's important to remember that organizational development programs are not always benign. They can and sometimes do create more damage than value. Thus, we should exercise caution before we add any new developmental activity to an organization's training/development agenda.

Since coaching has become part of the training mainstream only within the past few years, there is a limited amount of literature available, both in academic journals and the popular press. It is still unclear just what coaching is or isn't in an organizational context, since no generally agreed-on single definition exists, outside of the world of sports. However, it typically refers to either: 1) the manager as coach; 2) an internal HR person providing coaching for executives; and/or 3) an outside consultant providing a coaching program.

In addition, there are no generally agreed-upon program designs, and defined training standards are now just beginning to emerge. But no single standard currently exists to provide consistency and ensure quality. To help bridge this gap, we have identified and developed what we believe are the key metrics of a successful executive coaching process.

**EXECUTIVE COACHING: AN OVERVIEW**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term "coach" as either a private tutor or one who instructs a performer or team of performers (frequently in sports) on fundamentals and team strategy.

In the context of management, coaching appears to have first been used by Myles Mace in 1958, in Developing Executive Skills (Eds. H.E. Merrill and E. Marting, American Management Association), in the chapter entitled "On-the-Job Coaching." In this early context, coaching was seen as an employee job-development tool that managers used to foster greater productivity. Coaching became linked with job-skills development and at that time had no association with counselling or mentoring as it does today.

By the mid-1970s, authors started to introduce sports coaching techniques in management literature. This new approach was successful and was highlighted by the publication of Tim Gallwey's bestseller, *The Inner Game of Tennis,* in 1974.

It was not until the 1980s that coaching began to be seen primarily as a developmental activity, not linked with sports. This was a major departure because it shifted the role of the coach dramatically. In sports-oriented business literature, the coach is always the expert, the one with the answers. In this paradigm, the relationship between coach and player is one of command and control. If you ever watch Monday night football, you have observed that this approach is still alive and well today.

**THE NEW PARADIGM**

Since the 1990s, the role of coach has been redefined and a new paradigm has emerged. In this new model, the coach is not the expert, but is instead a committed "thought partner." He or she is not the leader with all the answers, but instead a team member who knows what questions will prompt partners or other team members to discover the answers themselves. Thus, coaching has become the next phase of employee empowerment.

Today, the focus is the special relationship that develops between coach and participant, and how this motivates people to exceed prior levels of achievement.

Three distinct tracks and types of coaching delivery have been identified in this new paradigm. ▶
1. Programs delivered by an external consultant working with executives in a coaching role.
2. Coaching as an empowerment tool for managers
3. Development activities delivered by internal consultants or HR managers in a coaching role

All three of these tracks have merit, but for the purpose of this article, we will focus on coaching delivered by the external consultant. We believe this is the most powerful of the three tracks because it is the only one with the potential to take full advantage of the benefits of the new coaching paradigm.

CURRENT PRACTICE
A coaching program’s basic design is very different from those used by the “charm schools” that senior executives used to be sent to for three to five days.

Coaching simply speeds up a process of change that would most likely occur anyway, if an individual had enough time. Without a coaching program that forces a client to focus and make the time (programs usually last three months to a year), people sometimes miss the real issues they need to focus on in order to minimize incongruence.

Incongruence is defined as the discrepancy between the participant’s self-image and his or her everyday experience. If the incongruence is eliminated, the problem is solved. This leads the coach to take as a given that the client is not broken and does not need fixing. Thus, the client (not the coach) has the answers to problems, though he or she just has not found them yet. It’s the coach’s role, not to provide the answers, but rather the questions and a supportive, judgment-free environment that motivates clients to explore their options and find the answers within themselves.

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Some of the distinct differences are that coaching is a 1:1 activity, not a group one; coaching is usually scheduled over a prolonged period, from three months to one year, not days; and coaching usually occurs onsite, not far from the workplace. Essentially “just-in-time training,” coaching is tailored specifically to meet an individual’s particular needs.

But what features, activities and roles identify a great coaching program from something that’s mediocre? There are no commonly accepted algorithms for success, but we do find recurring heuristics that we believe are necessary for success.

EXECUTIVE COACHING THAT SUCCEEDS
Successful coaching programs typically share most, if not all, of the following features and characteristics:

1. A successful process starts with a solid and effective underlying theory. Without this framework, there is no canvas on which the coach or the participant can paint. For the highly successful executive coach, we have found this is usually firmly rooted in humanistic psychology or philosophy (whether the coach knows it or not). This viewpoint starts from the premise that people are basically good, healthy and rational. A basic value within this framework is that when people need to make a change or are unhappy, they are not sick; they are simply incongruent.

2. Good coaching provides an environment in which people experience and receive unconditionally positive regard. This is a unique experience for many of us because the world has a tendency to withhold approval, unless we live up to a list of conditional “oughts” and/or “shoulds” regarding certain behaviour. Please note that while we said earlier that people were rational, the world often is not. Thus, if we behave as we ought to or should, the world will respond with positive regard towards us. But that regard is conditional, based upon our actions and their perception. If we fail or are seen to be out of alignment with the list of “shoulds” and “oughts,” the world frequently withholds its regard for us. This is not a pleasant experience.

In a successful coaching relationship, acceptance is unconditional. It is never withheld or withdrawn. You don’t have to earn it; it’s just there. This creates an environment in which people are truly heard, never judged and honoured for who they are today. Trust is easily and quickly built between the client and coach. This quickly leads to a foundation for successful exploration, ownership, action and positive change. This special 1:1 relation-
ship between client and coach and the frequently unwritten, unspoken ground rules that lay the foundation for success. It also immediately separates coaching from any other organizational development activity. In this aspect, the relationship is unique and a key to coaching's power to induce change quickly and successfully.

3. The coach also understands the client’s internal frame of reference and is able to convey this understanding to the client. The effective coach tries to see the world as the client sees it. These actions act as a mirror that enables the client to see themselves and the issues more clearly, without the use of defences to warp the image.

4. Each of the first three keys to successful coaching is based on the same foundation: the characteristics of the coaches themselves. Successful coaches must
   • Be inner-congruent. They know themselves and how they project to others.
   • Be authentic. They tell the truth always and never try and “fake it.”
   • Check their egos at the door. The client controls the session, with the coach as facilitator, not expert.
   • Be empathic. A great coach can put himself/herself in the other’s shoes.
   • Effectively communicate their empathic understanding to the client. Without this ability, unconditionally positive regard cannot be achieved.
   • Remain detached. They do not get sucked into the whirlwind of the client’s world, but instead stay outside, an objective observer. Being detached is not being cold or aloof, just objective.

Based on our observations and experiences, we have formulated a model that lays out the typical progression of these events and the roles both client and coach play in a successful engagement. Our framework is not psychotherapy, because our work is focused on vocational behaviour. On the other hand, as clients work through the progression, the results seem very therapeutic. Our approach is well grounded in research and you may notice it closely follows psychologist Carl Rogers’s theory of personal development. This postulates that when the conditions we have discussed are met in any person-to-person contact, they set the stage for personal growth. We believe this is the fundamental secret of a successful coaching session and program and what separates it from other types of development activities.

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<tr>
<th>THE ESSENCE OF GREAT EXECUTIVE COACHING</th>
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<td><strong>CLIENT’S ROLE</strong></td>
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<td>Presenting issues</td>
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<td>Developing vulnerability/openness</td>
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<td>Awareness of real issues</td>
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<td>Identification brings responsibility</td>
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<td>Developing a global strategic platform</td>
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<td>Behaviour change</td>
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<td>Ready to explore deeper issues</td>
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<td>Repeat the process</td>
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STEPS TO SUCCESS
As the client and coach engage in the process, there is a typical and predictable progression. This closely follows the pattern one would see emerge in any sound therapeutic process.

1. The presenting problems are not the real problems. These are usually just beyond the current reach of the client and may be causing some stress and perturbation. Reacting to the symptoms at the onset creates band-aid solutions that may relieve stress temporarily, but rarely have lasting impact. As coach and client develop a mutual trust and develop deeper levels of communication, defences drop and the real issues emerge.

2. The coach accelerates the client’s ability to identify these issues through targeted, empathic questioning and by playing back the answers. This allows the client to see the answers as though the coach was holding up a mirror. The constant reflection sharpens the focus and it is repeated until a clear picture is formed.

3. Clients develop an objective openness that allows them to work through the emotionality that previously blurred their vision. Once they identify and “feel” the root cause, they develop a deeper level of personal accountability. With true acceptance comes a willingness to take meaningful action. The stage is now set for growth. Acceptance also brings temporary relief and the confidence that solutions are possible. This is a wonderful time in the coaching relationship; after all, hope is an empowering emotion and can turn the atmosphere into an upbeat one. It is also a time when many believe – falsely – that they have solved the problem. It is the role of the coach to continue to hold the mirror up so the client does not slip into a false sense of security.

4. The client identifies the options for change and starts to exercise them. This leads to the development of new skills, and as the new skills are refined, they also become self-reinforcing. True root-problem resolution is now at hand, and as the new behaviour becomes embedded, closure occurs.

The first early successes act as a catalyst. The cycle then repeats itself, but at a more accelerated pace, quickly taking the client deeper and deeper. Seeing the client taking more and more courageous action as they “drill down” becomes the norm. The coach provides not only support, but also the occasional push to leave few stones unturned. Transformational change is the result.

The client now not only has a new skill set, but a new attitude, one that allows him or her to release the external coach and firmly establish a full-time inner one. This completes the process, and the client becomes his or her own coach for future challenges.

As one analyzes these developmental transitions, it becomes more obvious why executive coaching is having such an impact. It simply overcomes the key limitations of many traditional training/development approaches. These are:

1. Low transfer of training. Coaching is on-the-job training and by its nature, “just-in-time.”

2. Lack of relevancy. The client designs the agenda. So it’s the most relevant.

3. Barriers to change in the work environment. Coaching is a several-month program, not a three-day event. Thus, there is time to work through barriers, blockages and regressions.

4. Individual differences in learning readiness and style. Good coaching programs are custom-tailored to the individual and delivered one on one. The coach adjusts to the preferences and needs of the client, not the other way around.

Coaching is also extremely rewarding and productive, for, if nothing else, it fulfills a deep inner need all human beings have – the desire to be heard and understood without judgment.

We believe that our model of executive coaching captures the key behaviour of both client and coach and the transitions that occur in a process that works. If you don’t observe these transitions or if the coach cannot articulate them, we have to wonder if the approach is worth while. Simply put, we don’t believe the true power of the coaching relationship can be achieved without them.