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Coaching for Results

What to look for in a good executive coaching relationship.

By John Baldoni

The project had hit the wall. The harder the team pushed the less the wall moved. In fact, it seemed to be tipping backwards, threatening to crush everyone underneath. The wall is of course a metaphor for the intractable forces that so many teams find themselves up against when developing a new product, initiating a new release or implementing a process upgrade.

Teams do not like to confront walls; managers like it even less. Obstacles are factors that all managers face and how you face them is a measure of who you are as a leader. Most managers deal with the external obstacles very well—the assembly of a team, the marshalling of resources and the lobbying for support—however, many managers fare less well on the internal side—dealing with difficult people, sudden challenges or even personal setbacks.

These obstacles exact a toll on the psyche. While commitment to the enterprise is laudatory, managers must be careful not to take things too personally. Internalization leads to a build up of stress as well as the formation of another wall—one between manager and staff. Instead of reaching out, managers under duress either lash out at others, or seal themselves off. Either instance can be costly, not only to the project, but to the manager himself.

Call in a coach

When this happens—and it does every day in every kind of organization—what can you do? More and more companies are turning to executive coaches to help their managers not only deal with challenges, as described, but more importantly to develop their talents and skills so they can become better contributors and improved leaders. Management today *is* coaching; it is about bringing out the best in others, but managers, too, may need assistance.

Some managers may be resistant to coaching from an outside source because they feel as if they are being called on the carpet for some deficiency. Actually the opposite is true. Companies invest in coaches because they believe so strongly in their people they want them to succeed. Few organizations will hire a coach for someone who is on his way out the door; they invest in coaches to help people move up the ladder and most importantly stay there!

The question of *when* to hire a coach arises first. Executive coach Mark Sobol employs the "5 when's" approach. According to Sobol, who is based on the West Coast and specializes in global strategic change issues, coaching is indicated by one or more of the following: "one, when executives believe they need the insights and objectivity of someone 'outside the system;' two, when they are seeking new pathways to success; three, when they are questioning their definition of success; four, when they are transitioning to a new role of increased responsibility; or five, when the skills that have served them so well in the past are increasingly less effective in the present environment."

"Coaching is fundamentally about change," says Marsha Connolly of Conscious Learning, based in New Jersey. "You should consider hiring an executive coach when you want a disciplined process that will provide you with the opportunity to create a detailed strategy for change, gain ongoing feedback, make corrections and measure your progress." Connolly adds, "A good coach will set up a structure that works for you and can keep you on track." Knowing when and how to use an executive coach is important. Here are some suggestions for what you can expect a good coach to do and how you can leverage the experience for lasting impact.

- *Know the organization.* Executive coaches help managers address and improve behaviors that will increase compatibility as well as productivity. Communication is a frequent topic of coaching, as are delegation, recognition and even motivation. However, coaches must understand the organization in which the manager is working. What is appropriate for one organization may not be appropriate for another. For example, asking a manager to delegate more is fine but if the people in the organization are not prepared to assume authority, an issue of responsibility arises. The coach must help the manager prepare her people to assume more leadership roles. Thus knowledge of the culture is essential. The manager may be the client but the coach works for the organization; he is helping the manager perform better for her own sake as well as the sake of the organization.
- *Click together.* Coaching is a relationship. There must be chemistry between a coach and manager. The coach must be open, approachable and empathetic. If the manager does not feel this connection, then stop. To work toward performance improvement you need to trust your coach, and trust begins with an ability to connect with someone.
- *Understand you.* Coaching engagements begin with assessments. They may be personality based like Myers Briggs, or behavior based like a 360 evaluation. Such assessments are starting points, snapshots of an individual. Many coaches augment assessments with interviews with supervisors, colleagues and employees. "Assessments present information that usually gets to challenges or developmental issues in a way that one-on-one interviews may not uncover," says Tom Crane, a San Diego based executive coach and author of [The Heart of Coaching](#). "[Assessments] are really important to include as part of the 'due diligence' invested up front in the engagement." Assessments give the coach a good feel for who you are and what you can do. From there you build a relationship focused on enabling the manager to succeed. While the coach is paid by the company, ethics dictate that what occurs during a coaching session remains confidential. Otherwise there can be no trust.

- *Guide, not dictate.* In a successful coaching engagement the executive coach serves as a guide, not a dictator. For example, say you want to improve delegation skills. The coach must find out why the manager is not delegating first, and then find ways to encourage the manager to delegate. The coach can provide some ways to encourage delegation but it is ultimately up to the manager to take ownership of the behavior. The role of the coach is to make suggestions that the manager comes to regard as important and therefore necessary to implement. Furthermore, says Crane, "It takes great self-restraint to observe or witness challenges and coachee blind spots and not rush in with the answer." He advises, "It is far better to ask the right set of questions that cause self-reflection on behalf of the coachees, so they can discover their own answers."

- *Know when to say when.* Typical coaching engagements last six months but may extend for longer periods. "Coaching is a service; when the job is done, the coach is done," says Connolly, who has keen insight into coaching from both sides of the engagement. She makes this analogy, "If you hire a painter to paint a room in your house, the painter should ensure that the paint has dried appropriately, that the color is right, that it won't crack or peel and that you are satisfied that the room now looks the way you wanted it to look." Of course, she adds, "You can always bring him back" to paint other rooms, or in the case of coaching "to change another behavior." Managers have to resist the temptation to over-rely upon a coach, or cede decision-making. Sobol advises establishing two parameters. "First, every engagement should be sharply focused and defined as well as measured for success. Second, a series of engagements is appropriate only if the client's capabilities are continuously and visibly being built."

- *Measure success.* Coaching must be specific. You select one behavior at a time to work on. Take communications. The challenge may be to encourage the coachee to be a better listener. After a period of time, say six weeks or three months, find out how his listening has improved. You can do that by asking those he manages as well as those he reports to how well the manager is listening. Their feedback is essential to development. From there you move to something else or refine the behavior further.

Coaching limits

Taking ownership of the coaching process is critical to the success. Highly performing managers want an edge that will enable them to get to the top of their game and stay there. And that is one reason that executive coaching is catching on. Most often managers have what they need to succeed; it's a matter of self-discovery and self-application. That's where a coach can help. As Sobol puts it, "The role of a coach is to listen more than talk, discern rather than judge, and to shine a light when it's hard to see the way." Frequently the coach will provide insights into self that will lead managers on a leadership path; that is, they will learn to leverage the talents and skills of others to become more skilful managers and more committed leaders. So much of leadership is about putting others in a position to succeed. Which is exactly what coaching is all about.

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John Baldoni is a leadership communications consultant who works with Fortune 500 companies as well as nonprofits including the University of Michigan. He is a frequent keynote and workshop speaker as well as the author of six books on leadership; the latest is [How Great Leaders Get Great Results](#). He invites readers to visit his leadership resource website at www.johnbaldoni.com