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Ungagged: Executives on executive coaching

Imagine, writes this author, "reading a report about an Olympic training program that omits the athletes' experiences." As implausible as it seems, that omission, or failing, compromises much of the commentary on executive coaching. What the coach has to say can be valuable, but the commentary can't be all that meaningful unless comments by the players -- executives -- are included. This author went directly to executives, who for the first time, voiced their opinions on the value and utility of executive coaching.

By Christine Turner

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Executive coaching is a popular leadership development strategy. Yet few studies have examined its utility and value. Executive coaches have published literature on executive coaching, but it tends to be descriptive rather than research-based. Furthermore, it does not examine executive coaching from the standpoint of executives who have been coached. That's like reading a report about an Olympic training program that omits the athletes' experiences

To address this situation, I conducted one of the first research studies of executive coaching from the standpoint of executives. The executives who participated in my study work in a range of sectors, including manufacturing, financial services, government, health care and the pharmaceutical industry. I used semi-structured interviewing, which involved asking a lot of open-ended questions. This gave the participants the opportunity to discuss their views of executive coaching at length. They were both candid and forthcoming about their impressions of coaching. The opportunity to take part in my study, in effect, "ungagged" them.

The questions that guided my research were: What are

the benefits of executive coaching? What are its limitations? What factors are critical to its success? I will present my results through the portraits of three typical executives who participated in my study. I have changed their names to protect their identities. All of them said they were working with their coaches on improving their leadership skills. Since leadership has many connotations, I asked for specifics, and was told: They were fine-tuning their vision for the business; empowering and motivating staff; improving their communication and listening skills; and becoming more confident and assertive. Interestingly, these executives were in agreement that strong leadership is not about technical competence. Instead, they said the priority for leaders was to gain competence in the soft skills domain. They equated strong leadership with heightened levels of emotional intelligence.

Benefits of executive coaching

Executives identified five significant benefits of executive coaching as a leadership development strategy. They are:

1. Continuous one-on-one attention
2. Expanded thinking through dialogue with a curious outsider
3. Self-awareness, including blind spots
4. Personal accountability for development
5. Just-in-time learning.

1. Continuous one-on-one attention

The executives said the most significant benefit was the individualized attention they received from their coaches. Add to this the fact that executive coaching takes place over an extended period of time and it becomes a great way to acquire and ingrain new skills.

Let's take a look at Jack's experience. Jack is vice-president of finance at a pharmaceutical company. He is pleased with his abilities in the "technical and strategic areas." He wanted coaching for "sustained interpersonal skills

development" because it is a "monumental effort" for him to change his ways. The continuous one-on-one attention offered in executive coaching suits him perfectly. "Personally, I love coaching," he says. "It's one of the best forms of development, much better than going to a course. I don't think you can go into a room and come out changed. I do think you need some ongoing effort, and this can't be accomplished by taking a course or reading a book or having a discussion."

Anne, an executive vice-president in the financial services industry, agrees that continuous one-on-one attention is a huge benefit. She says coaching is much better than what she calls the "cookie-cutter approach" that is used in traditional classroom situations. In her opinion, classroom-based programs are useful for "strategic and tactical" training and for "MBA-ish academic content" such as finance. But executive coaching works for the "leadership, performance, personal effectiveness and 360 development that she wants. It offers plenty of opportunities to test drive new skills until they become second nature. "Coaching provides a consistent, long-term development that gets embedded and becomes part of your routine," says Anne.

2. Expanded thinking through dialoguing with a curious outsider

Dialogue, fuelled through powerful questions, is at the heart of the coaching process. In coaching conversations, executives think out loud, become more reflective and gain access to their own tacit knowledge and unexplored ideas. The coach's role is to act as a sounding board, confidant, partner, challenger and catalyst for change.

While it may sound counterintuitive, it can be a real benefit if the coach's professional background is different from that of the executive. It allows the coach to enter into the relationship from a place of naiveté, with curiosity and questions, not assumptions and recommendations. This creates leverage, as Rick's experience illustrates.

Rick is president of a family business that is expanding rapidly throughout North America. He hired an executive coach because, as the saying goes, "It's lonely at the top." "I don't have a boss above me, and coaching provides someone I can communicate with," says Rick. Initially, Rick interviewed coaches with a lot of business development experience, because he thought that would

be beneficial. But then he realized he didn't want a coach that he could "carbon copy"; he wanted to expand his thinking and be "pulled into a place that unleashes a lot of creative and visionary ideas." So he hired an "objective outsider" with a completely different professional background than his own.

Rick's coach has posed lots of thought-provoking questions rather than imposing answers on him. As Rick says, "When you're in charge of 120 employees, you have a lot of challenges. I needed an independent person for this, to take leaps, go to new places. I needed someone to push me and mentally challenge me. You can get complacent, do business as usual and make a good buck. But that was not what I wanted."

Rick still remembers the exact moment when his sales team saw him as a leader. "If you can create that," he says, "people will walk through walls to be with you."

3. Self-awareness, including the blind spots

The expression "no pain, no gain" is true for coaching; it is not easy to be challenged out of your business-as-usual comfort zone. Just ask Jack, who, in the course of coaching, was forced to acknowledge one of his blind spots. Jack has excellent technical skills and has fast-tracked to a senior executive position. He was certain he was a good leader -- that is, until his coach asked him questions about his team's excitement and engagement levels. It became clear to the coach that Jack's team was frustrated. Jack was furious and "insulted" and he vowed never to work with his coach again. Subsequently, Jack pondered his strong reaction. He realized his coach had hit a nerve. "That's why I reacted like that, because it was true," he says.

Jack is still working with his coach and continues to learn and develop. He appreciates his coach's role in helping him gain self-awareness, which means understanding his strengths as well as his blind spots. "I don't have these kinds of discussions with anybody else," he says. "I am on such a straight path that I can't see what's going on. That's where coaching really helps me." Jack now expects his coach to hit a nerve from time to time. He sums it up this way: "The value to me is not for a coach to be really nice to me. I don't need another friend. The value to me is having somebody to help me see what I can't see." Coaching acts as a mirror for Jack, providing him with

honest feedback and revealing gaps so he can see himself more clearly, as well as help him to identify goals and promoting sustained action.

4. Personal accountability for development

Some executives use sports metaphors to describe coaching. Anne, a high achiever, thinks of coaching as a springboard for reaching her personal best at work. "Olympic medallists have coaches," she says. "I want to be an Olympic medallist in business." Anne regards her coach as her "personal trainer."

The common denominator in executive coaching and personal training is accountability. You can learn proper techniques in a few training sessions at the gym, but it is easy to lose your way, by cutting corners, using improper techniques or missing workouts. Ongoing personal training creates momentum and accountability for development. The same is true for executive coaching. As Anne says, "Coaching provides an objective outside person to help you do assessments, set developmental plans and hold you accountable."

Anne has invested heavily in her career, through education and hard work. She views coaching as another form of investment. She and her coach established developmental targets on day one. Now they have weekly meetings, either in person or on the telephone, to discuss her progress toward her targets. Through coaching, Anne holds herself accountable for her continued success. Her bottom line: "Gotta go places that you haven't been."

5. Just-in-time learning

Executive coaching facilitates what I call "just-in-time learning," which is all about learning on the spot. Jack described a coaching session that he had on the day preceding an important meeting. He told his coach that he wanted to "take a stand" in the meeting, and that he wanted to come across as confident, self-assured and assertive.

Coaching provided Jack with a dress rehearsal. He used the session to develop a strategy for the meeting. He knew that thinking on his feet in front of a group of people was not one of his strengths, so he and his coach brainstormed potential questions. Jack prepared his answers and did some role playing. The next day Jack

was outstanding. He called it "a powerful experience." The coaching session had facilitated just-in-time learning.

Limitations

Executives were hard-pressed to find any limitations of coaching, but they did touch on four areas: coaching methodology, continuity, language, measurement of results.

Methodology

Some executives observed a lack of clarity about the coaching process and a lack of continuity between the coaching sessions; they also noted that the language used in the coaching sessions sometimes seemed unusual in a business context. I became aware of these issues during participant screening when I asked executives to locate themselves in the coaching process. On more than one occasion I heard, "There's a process?" It turns out that some coaches do not explain their methodology up front in the first coaching session. This leads to confusion among executives who like to see a plan and an itinerary. Executives recommended that coaches outline the coaching process in the initial coaching session, preferably with a model and methodology, as a means of providing a concrete map of the road ahead.

Continuity

Lack of continuity between coaching sessions can also be frustrating for executives. Momentum is interrupted when coaches do not pick up where they left off in the previous session, and the coaches' credibility and commitment may also be called into question. Executives recommend that coaches take notes in each session and review these highlights in the next meeting.

Language

Coaching language is another limitation, albeit a minor one. Some executive coaches use language that is highly unusual in business. One executive noted that the president of his firm suddenly began to use atypical "coaching language" when speaking to employees. He recommended that coaches stick to the basics of business language.

Measuring results

Executives were unanimous in mentioning appreciable qualitative results from coaching, including perceptions of positive personal change, favourable feedback and a "feeling" that coaching is working. Changes are also visible at the organizational level. One executive noted that employees in her organization were more successful in meeting deadlines and experienced fewer frustrations after the president had received coaching. The entire organization benefited from the president's strengthened leadership skills. As this executive said, "If leadership is focused, passionate and visionary, it filters throughout the organization."

While qualitative results are readily available, quantification is another matter. "You don't start off with a baseline and take a measure at the middle or the end to see if there has been improvement," said one participant in my study. "It's observable things that measure the impact." Executives could not connect coaching directly to quantitative results, but this did not concern them because they were pleased with their qualitative results.

Some anecdotes, such as this one, hint at metrics:

We had a great year this year. We flew by every expectation. Was it a result of coaching? If you look at the number of objectives we've achieved this year, as opposed to what we achieved last year, it's improved significantly. From that point of view-our annual objectives, our big process -- we've definitely had better buy-in, better everything, than we've had in previous years. So I think that would be a result of coaching. Not 100%, but a big part.

Still, the ROI of executive coaching has been illusive, although methods for demonstrating it are becoming available. They can be found in Anderson and Anderson's groundbreaking *Coaching That Counts* (Elsevier, Butterworth Heinemann, 2005) and the *Manchester Review* (McGovern, Lindemann, Vergara, Murphy, Barker & Warrenfeltz, 2001, Volume 6, Number 1; available through Google). As more information on measurement becomes available, it makes sense that coaches include quantification in their coaching methodology.

Critical success factors

The factors that play a significant role in creating a successful coaching initiative are: a willing executive, a skilled coach and realistic expectations.

Willing executive

A willing executive is someone who enters into coaching voluntarily, with enthusiasm and the desire to examine their gaps as well as their assets. This implies that willing executives are those who are open to self-discovery and personal growth, and who want to be coached; otherwise, coaching is a dead-end street.

Skilled coach

The executives in my study admitted that they rarely checked the credentials of their coaches because they were confident the people they selected had the requisite qualifications and skills. It simply had not occurred to them to check. Only one executive mentioned coach training and certification as important. But they all agreed on the importance of the coach's ability to build relationships, ask challenging questions, listen effectively, create accountability and motivate them toward their objectives.

Realistic expectations

Executives are adamant that coaching is neither a magic bullet nor a quick fix. One executive was concerned that some members of his senior management team seemed to think that coaching could solve everything:

"It makes me nervous when somebody picks up something like coaching with that kind of zealotry. You're expecting so much from it, and I think it's going to let you down. I worry about that in this company. We're having a great year, so it's fine. But what happens if we have a really terrible year? Do we blame that on coaching? That happened in my last company. All of a sudden they stopped using coaches. That kind of business decision makes me nervous. Too much loving and too much hating is not a good thing from leadership."

It must be understood that the primary purpose of executive coaching is to help executives learn. Coaching is not a panacea for a host of business ailments. It falls on the shoulders of coaches to clarify the purpose of

coaching at the beginning of the process, to ensure all expectations are realistic. It is also important for executives to realize that they can slip into old habits during stressful times at work. But, as coaching is ongoing, there are plenty of opportunities to get back on track. Relapses are an inevitable part of the process, and decrease as time goes on.

Soft closure

Executives that participated in my study were unanimous in their high regard for coaching as a leadership development strategy. They identified five primary benefits of coaching: continuous one-on-one attention; expanded thinking through dialogue with a curious outsider; increased self-awareness, including blind spots; personal accountability for development; and just-in-time learning. When I explored the notion of closure, most agreed that it should be "soft" -- that is, their coaches should be available for short conversations from time to time. They were not concerned about going solo. As one executive quipped, "I never felt like the person whose therapist was hit by a bus and couldn't go on." **■**