

# Employee Development

## Executive Coaching

### What is Executive Coaching?

The word 'coach' instantly conjures up an image of a middle aged man standing by the touch line of a football pitch frantically waving his arms and uttering expletives in Italian, French, German or occasionally English. Understandable, but not entirely helpful in the context of executive coaching.

Coaching in any field is often thought of as guidance or the imparting of great wisdom. In other words, teaching. This is **not** what executive coaching is about. We start from the assumption that the client already has a proven ability and has already attained a degree of success in their field. When significant changes occur however in their role, e.g. a major promotion, a move from executor to manager, their learning experience up to that point can be as much of a hindrance as a help.

Coaching helps the client to qualify their previous experience and take from it that which will help them to move forward. Perhaps more importantly, it helps the client to understand those experiences or pre-conceptions that may not be useful or relevant, and place them to one side, or understand how they should be harnessed.

In short, the coach's role is to unlock potential, and help the client to fashion this potential into tangible actions.

### Coaching vs Training

Training as a concept is well understood. Someone who knows more about a subject than the candidate will impart knowledge using a variety of methods and tools. The challenge for the trainer is to maximise retention, and overcome disagreement. At higher levels within an organisation or area of expertise, the candidates will have a good foundation of knowledge and experience and so will inevitably disregard some of the content as not relevant to them, or plain wrong.

Coaching differs in that it is not concerned with imparting information. The coach will use a series of questions to establish the areas in which the candidate wants and needs to develop. Further questioning will then draw from the candidate what they believe they need to do to achieve this. All of the content is generated by the candidate. The coach may guide and suggest routes of thought, but all the conclusions will be defined by the candidate. Discovery is a far more powerful route to learning than simply being told.

### Who will benefit

Coaching is most effective for mid to high level managers who are experiencing some degree of change in their role. Most commonly the change involves behaviours rather than actions initially e.g. where a manager is moving from a functional role into a strategic or supervisory one. The new challenges they will be facing may involve the need to make bigger strategic decisions, or most

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commonly, people management, either for the first time or of people they have worked at the same level as previously.

It is impossible to successfully coach candidates who do not want to participate, so a willingness to develop and an understanding that this is a positive step to enhance their skills, rather than a remedial course of action to fill in something that is missing, is essential.

### The Process

Each instance is unique, however the broad process starts by looking back over a period of the candidate's career/life, usually three to five years and examining what their goals were at the beginning of that period and how they have been achieved or otherwise. In examining the gap between the three year vision and the current reality, we will identify the key learning experiences, the key successes and the reasons for any failures. We then look at the same period going forward and identify the strengths possessed and required, possible pitfalls and likely turning points. In doing this, we will concentrate on three main areas.

This is not a goal in itself, but rather a tool to set the candidate into a way of thinking that they have not used before. The coach asks questions, but all the answers come from the candidate. The objective is not to teach the candidate anything they did not know, but to fully uncover and understand the relevance of what they may not have known they already knew.

### Self-Awareness

*O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us  
To see ourselves as ithers see us!  
It wad frae mony a blunder free us  
An foolish notion  
What airs in dress an gait wad lea'e us  
An' e'en devotion!*

'Tae a Louse' Robert Burns 1786

We all have a self-image. Suave, sophisticated, cool under pressure, a man of few words but decisive actions. This may be how we see ourselves, or how we would like to present ourselves. All but the most confident (or arrogant) also have self-doubt. In most cases, the way we appear to others lies somewhere in between. Understanding how we are perceived by others, and how we impact on them, is a rare gift indeed, but an essential skill in effectively managing our relationships, in business or any other walk of life.

Through skilful questioning, the coach will help the client to gain a clearer understanding of the skills they possess, the pre-conceptions they hold and the image they project. It is like holding up what can seem to be a brutally honest mirror. The candidate is embarking on a journey. To successfully get to where they want to be, they must first understand exactly where they are.

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### Environment

This is closely related to self-awareness. We examine the barriers and opportunities perceived by the candidate in their current and prospective new environments. As they become more aware of themselves, their attitude to both positive and negative influences will change as they begin to understand how they can impact on them differently.

### Objectives

The willingness to enter the coaching process is prompted by a significant change. Identifying the changes required to develop in the new environment is pivotal to success. The objectives will be different for each candidate and may be to do with the way they work, how they present themselves, or how they interact and impact on those around them, either in a leadership or subordinate role.

*If you always do what you always did, you will always get what you always got.*

*A Einstein*

Whatever the final objectives are, they will be set and defined by the candidate, with the coach assisting them in the process of achieving clarity and consistency of thinking through the use of detailed and skilled questioning.

### The Relationship between Coach and Candidate

Coaching can only work where there is complete confidence between coach and candidate. The parameters for the type of information that can be passed outside the coaching relationship must be clear and unambiguous. Normally this would be complete confidentiality with the exception of any information which led the coach to believe that the candidate or someone they interact with was in danger, or a criminal offence was revealed. The basic tenets of the relationship however are as follows;

Coach and candidate are equals. A coach is not there to judge

The coach's role is to question, challenge and support to facilitate understanding

The candidate is resourceful. He has the ability to reconcile his own issues. The coach may suggest a course, but the candidate will decide for himself

Tangible actions are important. Where either party commits to them, they will follow through