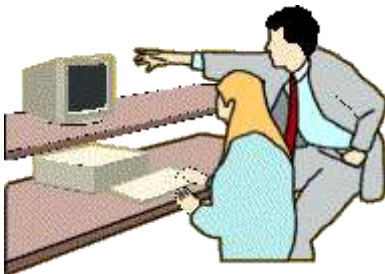


Avoiding The Most Common Executive Coaching Mistakes

By George J. Stiles



Executive Coaching is a very powerful management development tool. Used effectively it can produce positive results. Selecting the wrong coach or inappropriate application can discredit its future value for years.

1. Selecting the wrong person for coaching.

Organizations using Executive Coaching as a management development tool should view it as an investment to make proven leaders even more effective. Investing time and money in people who are unwilling to change deprives the company from growing aspiring leaders.

Executive Coaching is not the management tool in the following situations:

- *An executive who needs 'fixing' or has serious performance issues.* Executive Coaching is not for people already 'written off'; it is an inappropriate 'one last try'.
- *A person who is not open to growth and change.* Executives forced into coaching will fight, subvert and malign the process. This is frustrating for the coach and the client as well as a waste of time and money.
- *Someone with a deep-seated personality flaw or disorder.* This might not be apparent at the outset of the coaching process, but a good coach will have the tools and insights to recognize and flag a psychological problem quickly. Clinical narcissism, for example, is not uncommon in executives but coaching cannot alter this behavior.
- *An executive who does not have enough talent or potential for significant growth.*
- *A man or woman with ingrained sexual, racial or religious prejudices.* This employee's personal conduct may place the organization in a precarious legal position. An attorney is better suited to point out the personal consequences of such behavior

Companies stigmatize coaching when they use it as a last resort to shape up problem executives. Once they do this, the word is out that Coaching is for the hopeless. Later on when Coaching is suggested to valuable executives, they will think that their performance and potential is in doubt.

2. Selecting the wrong coach.

Executive Coaching is a wide-open, unregulated profession. There is little research and less history to provide an infallible guide for choosing a good coach. A *Harvard Business Review* article entitled *The Wild West of Executive Coaching* advises that the best Coaching is "practiced by individuals with acute perception, diplomacy, sound judgment and the ability to navigate conflicts with integrity.

Perhaps the most important qualifications are character and insight, distilled as much from the coach's personal experience as from formal training."

Any coach working with executives must understand the business environment. He or she must earn credibility and establish trust within the company. It is paramount that a coach has the experience, competency, and ability to effect behavioral change. The best coaches forge relationships with executives that are based on honesty, insight, trust and caring. They have the expertise to provide feedback that the coachee would never obtain from peers and superiors.

Good coaches nudge, support, cajole, provoke, applaud, challenge and persevere. Total dedication to the coachee's success is pervasive and critical.

Consider these issues when choosing a coach:

- *The wrong credentials.* While Executive Coaching owes a distant debt to psychotherapy, most of its practitioners have woefully little business experience. Likewise, a businessperson with no management experience would make a poor coach.
- *The wrong chemistry.* The client company should qualify coaches, but the person to be coached should be involved in the final choice.
- *Not enough seniority.* To help business leaders with insight and guidance, a coach has to have been there.
- *Insufficient network of professional resources.* No Executive Coach or firm can have the expertise to solve all problems. A large and trusted network of varied professionals is a necessary resource that can be tapped into quickly for training, intervention, assessment, counseling or second opinions.

3. Selecting the wrong firm

The Executive Coaching industry has grown and matured. Price competition has forced some firms to standardize product quality and hire less experienced (cheaper) people. As happened with outplacement, Executive Coaching with these firms runs the risk of becoming a commodity. There is little evidence that efforts to introduce universal standards or coach certification by self-appointed bodies has any validity. There is also little evidence that any one approach to Executive Coaching is better than another.

Each coaching assignment is unique, governed by the relationships, goals and corporate environment

4. Not agreeing on goals and measurements.

Executive Coaching is a triangular relationship between the Coach, Coachee and Client. A simple, one sentence outcome should be agreed to at the outset. Trust is essential and early agreement on the boundaries of confidentiality and reporting is critical.

Choosing too many behaviors to modify is a common mistake; two or three should be the maximum. Also, behavioral change is incremental and difficult to measure but an intermittent re-evaluation of behaviors and renegotiation of plans/goals will produce the best results.

5. Using ineffective or inadequate assessment tools.

To be successful a coach needs to know as much as possible about the coachee, the client's business and culture and the people most frequently involved with the coachee.

A 360° assessment tool, edited to focus on specific coaching goals, is the most efficient way to gather this information. However, a written anonymous survey is less powerful than the Coach personally

interviewing 5 – 10 people. This will elicit more thorough information and establish a basis for follow-up assessments.

A battery of off-site psychometric tests performed by a psychologist with the feedback recorded and attended by the coach can significantly accelerate insights and have a secondary value of identifying issues that would hinder successful coaching.

6. Coaching assignment too short.

Successful Executive Coaching requires change in behavior and perception. This requires time ... at least a year.

There is a school of coaches that professes to sell short-term or session-by-session coaching. This cannot work. To be effective, an Executive Coach needs to know the client, the critical factors and vocabulary of its business and, most importantly, the coachee. Executive Coaching does not work using abstract universal concepts.

Tiger Woods would not use a coach who was unfamiliar with both him and golf.

About the author:

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