

## TAKING SOME OF THE MYSTERY OUT OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

There is no doubt that executive coaching can make a significant contribution to the development of individuals, teams and organisations. However, it's clear that many managers remain unclear on what it can do and how the process works. In particular there are concerns that it is a remedial activity which is done **to** you. There may also be a concern that a participant can somehow "fail" at being coached. The reality is that the process presents an opportunity to take stock and then move forward. Rather than pass/fail, it represents an opportunity for a win in terms of increased awareness and commitment to take action.

The range of reasons cited by those purchasing executive coaching for themselves or someone in their organisation are varied. However the following are key drivers:

- Organisations are becoming more complex and moving faster
- Boundaries and roles lack the clarity they once were perceived to possess
- The management of workplace performance and assessment are non-negotiable
- Organisations are increasingly aware that pressure on results is potentially detrimental to the innovation and creativity necessary for future success
- The particular pressures in partnerships around the identification of potential partners and the transparency of the processes used
- The need to keep talented people motivated

There are also a range of challenges and opportunities facing **individuals**:

- The need to hit the ground running when moving into a new role and the critical importance of tuning in to the real agenda as quickly as possible
- An increasing number of high potential individuals questioning what they really want from their career in terms of work-life balance

To allay some fears and misapprehensions here is a working definition of the executive coaching process:

*The process by which the coach uses appropriate listening and questioning skills to work with the participant to enable them to review and ultimately own solutions to issues upon which they seek resolution*

A participant observed that

*"it enabled me to hold up the mirror and look into it,...the apparent lack of direction was a little disconcerting at the start; I had anticipated someone telling me what to do"*

Executive coaching cannot work through imposition, instead the coaching process provides a playground where it's ok to explore what works and what didn't, free of the concerns that many senior professionals have about acknowledging any fallibility.

One author has likened it to "guided self-exploration", and herein lies another issue: executive coaching is not a quick fix and neither is the process that visible to anyone but the participant; at least in the early stages. Indeed a key issue for the coach and the participant and their organisation is absolute clarity about what gets reported on by whom and to whom. It's equally important to scope out what "success" may look like after six or more coaching sessions spread over a number of months. The 80/20 rule applies here: whilst the key feature of any executive coaching programme is the coaching sessions themselves, if the purpose of the intervention is not clear, disappointment is inevitable. Furthermore executive coaching may not be the appropriate response. So **please** avoid the "Bermuda triangle" into which good intentions sink by ensuring that coach, participant and sponsor **do** sit down together to explore the purpose and likely outcomes.

Unlike consultancy which an organization may commission on behalf of the business, executive coaching just won't work without the active commitment of the participant. The tools used are conversation and reflection with a pause between each coaching session to practise and reflect on the difference a new approach may have produced. Other useful ways of getting feedback on how you are rather than how you seem, are 360 degree feedback and psychometrics.

This "pause" is critically important. The power of the executive coaching sessions invariably comes out as an individual puts a toe in the water and starts to do some of the things they committed to at their last session.

A good coach will have a repertoire of approaches to help the participant review their situation. They also need:

- To know themselves, their strengths and limitations
- To have completed a professional training programme
- To understand the organizational context in which executive coaching takes place
- Be passionate about learning from their work along with an innate sense of curiosity

The latter point is particularly important, since the intuition a coach brings to a coaching session and the questions this may produce can help a participant look at their situation in a new light.

And what themes are likely to be the reasons for an individual or organisation to consider the benefits of working with an executive coach?

- A confidante with whom to share thoughts, concerns and aspirations during the first three months in a new role. Many individuals comment on the fact that a new role "was not quite what I expected when I accepted the job". The comment is often made by individuals moving up within their own organisation. The first hundred days can be lonely as well as exciting; executive coaching can help ensure a sense of perspective is present.
- An international assignee wanting the opportunity to reflect on the challenges a new location and culture can present. Unfortunately much of the effort into moving key people – and their families – from one unit to another focuses on tax advice, logistics and schools. Clearly these are important, but so is recognising that the individual is likely to have a wide range of issues that they can't review with their old boss and may not be ready to surface with their new boss. Taking work issues home to a family who are also settling in is also a challenge.
- A neutral sparring partner with whom to test out ways of managing a team when one's primary experience has been technical management. Despite the vast amount of literature on competencies, many managers don't get too much practical help in how to manage people. Neither do they always get feedback in a way that helps them see how they show up to others as managers. Executive coaching can provide a great opportunity to open a window on oneself in an entirely safe environment and work on achieving a greater understanding of the behaviours required to shift one's own performance and that of the team.
- A little used opportunity is in the area of project management. As the scale – and impact – of project working increases, so does the cost of failure or late delivery. And despite increasingly sophisticated reporting frameworks it remains all too easy for the personal feelings of a project team about the barriers to success to go unresolved. As one manager noted:  
*"Would a coach have helped...it's difficult to know for sure, but more openness about what we **didn't** know would have made a tremendous difference at the start...so would coach to ensure we clearly understood our roles. Our sponsor clearly thought their role was simply to give a regular pep talk rather than constructively challenge our planning assumptions."*

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