

ACTUALIZING YOUR EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP TALENT

GUIDELINES FOR LEVERAGING THE SUCCESS OF YOUR EXECUTIVE COACHING PROGRAMS

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The application of executive coaching in organizations is on the rise. There are several good reasons for the emergence of this developmental power tool.

1. Organizations are finding themselves in a rapidly changing and uncertain business environment. Executives and emerging leaders at all levels are realizing the need to retool their leadership skills to successfully navigate these changes. Coaching is the retooling mechanism that many executives are employing to assist them in obtaining the versatility necessary to be successful in today's business world.
2. In the rapidly growing economy of the 90's many successful middle managers and technical experts rose to the executive ranks with little preparation to take on the mantle of leadership. Organizations are realizing the costs of not supporting these executives in their development. Coaching is the perfect just-in-time solution that allows for the rapid development needed.
3. There is lots of evidence that when executive coaching is applied well there is a tremendous return on investment for the organization¹. Coaching is a methodology that has been proven to produce breakthroughs in performance.

Because of the points above, there is every reason to consider that the rise in executive coaching will continue to escalate. If your organization is considering increasing its investment in its executive coaching program the five guidelines highlighted in this article will assist you in leveraging that investment. Here is a synopsis of those guidelines:

1. Chose wisely – employ coaching to develop your best and brightest leaders
2. Focus the program on a vision for executive leadership and meaningful business results rather than fixing problem behaviors
3. Make sure there are clear measures of success for the program
4. Choose the right time to employ coaching with an executive or executive team
5. Assign a sponsor to the individual(s) being coached

We will take each of these one by one and suggest some ideas for how to practically employ them.

Chose wisely – Focus on Your Best and Brightest

One of the keys to your future success is powerful executive leadership. Do you have a rich pipeline of well-developed leaders ready to step into the executive ranks? Those organizations that already have strong succession planning in place know the benefits of employing executive coaching with your best and brightest. However, for many, coaching is still a process that seems to kick in when problems arise. While this type of remedial or performance coaching has had moderate success – it vastly underutilizes the possibilities that coaching can bring when a highly talented leader is given the opportunity to leverage their talents even more.

For some, the idea of utilizing executive coaching as a support for the most talented might seem counter intuitive. You might be asking - why should we focus on people who already are effective? The answer is simple. While most successful people value their success and are confident in their abilities, they have little awareness around the specific formula they have used to achieve success. They also have very little understanding how to explain to others how they got where they are today.

¹ Manchester research - <http://www.manchesterus.com/executivecoachingyieldsreturnoninvestment.html>

In the short run, providing coaching to your most talented people magnifies their impact and most likely that of their team. In the long run, it helps your talented leaders turn into superstars and assists them in becoming powerful mentors to other future leaders in your organization.

Focus on a Vision and Results – Not Problem Behaviors

Most executives who come to coaching have rough edges to polish and coaching can be a powerful tool to help in this polishing process. However, coaching can be better leveraged when a behavior change is placed into a context that includes both a vision for that individual's executive leadership and a focus on generating breakthroughs in meaningful business results.

Vast research has shown that the expectations you have of someone will create a self-fulfilling prophecy in results². If you focus on helping someone become an outstanding leader – you will tend to create an outstanding leader. If you focus on problem behaviors you will find that the person tends to exhibit them. Therefore any executive coaching initiative needs to begin by having the executive and their sponsor (preferably their manager) craft a mutually motivating vision for the individual's executive leadership. This vision needs to create clear and powerful expectations for what this person is becoming – a vision that will tightly align the individual's passions and talents with organizational needs.

It is also very important that the coaching program be placed in the context of meaningful business results. In fact, we even recommend focusing the executive on a key opportunity or initiative while they are being coached. For example -:

- A sales executive might be asked to focus on producing an increase in new client acquisition, gross sales margin or client retention
- A CIO might be asked to leverage coaching to provide additional support for him and his team to successfully complete a major system implementation within scope
- A practice leader in a professional services firm might be asked to apply coaching to support her in more successfully introducing and cross selling a new line of business to her existing client base.

If you consider how human beings learn and grow – much of it happens through “baptism by fire”. Generating a vision for executive leadership and providing a powerful, results focus for coaching will add velocity to the developmental exercise because something real and meaningful is at stake in the process. When the stakes are higher, talented people will use all means necessary to achieve success. These benefits include the effective use of the coaching opportunity.

The bottom line is that a vision and results focus creates leverage for bringing out the best in the individual being coached. If you only focus on “fixing behaviors” – both the executive and the organization will likely find a less than satisfying outcome from the coaching experience.

Create clear measures of success

Now that you have a vision and have aligned the program with meaningful business results it is important that you have clear measures of success. As you look over the time of the coaching engagement (6 months, 12 months, 18 months, etc.) we suggest you ask the following questions:

- › How are we going to know we are moving closer to the vision for executive leadership?
- › What kinds of breakthroughs would be highly valuable given the business results we are seeking to achieve?
- › What measures are we going to utilize to determine that this executive is turning their leadership potential into reality?

The measurement parameters that you use can be objective. For example, you might consider increases in profitability, sales growth, employee retention, productivity gains or decreases in expenses. Yet, there are also important subjective measures that can be considered. Such measures might include improvements in employee satisfaction, leadership effectiveness, teamwork or improvement on specific 360° ratings.

² J.S. Livingston, "Pygmalion in Management." Harvard Business Review, reprint #88509, in The Best of the Harvard Business Review, Harvard Business School Press, 1991.

The key is to make sure important and relevant measures are in place to monitor the program. Setting measures up front ensures that people understand the importance of the initiative to both the individual and the organization.

These measures need to be agreed to by the executive, sponsor(s) and the coach. Taking the time necessary at the beginning of the engagement to come to agreement around these outcomes and expectations helps insure the best outcome. We also suggest having scheduled check-in points along the way to gauge progress. These should focus on progress based on the vision and measures while maintaining the confidentiality of the coaching relationship.

Chose the Best Time

A very high percentage of coaching programs also occur when individuals are deemed in trouble by their manager or peers. Unfortunately at this point it may be too late for coaching to have maximum impact.

We suggest that there are at least four instances when executive coaching might be considered most timely. These occasions include:

- A request from the leader for executive coaching or support in their leadership development

A request for coaching is the most powerful context for success because the individual is openly expressing their desire to grow and most likely sees the value of self-examination. A noble goal for your organization would be to create such a value added image around the benefits of receiving coaching that your emerging leaders and executives would be making requests for a coach. This goal will likely be reached when people begin to notice your best and brightest are acknowledging the value of coaching and the positive impact it has had for them and for their results. This will magnify the importance of learning and performance enhancement as well as create a buzz in your organization that having a coach is a sign of recognition of excellence.

- At the time of promotion of a leader to a new position of leadership

Being promoted into a higher position of management or leadership usually challenges an individual because they understand they are in new territory. Historically, organizations have expected that individuals who have had a high degree of business success or are valued for their technical expertise can easily make the leap into a leadership role. However, as we highlighted at the beginning of this article, organizations are finding this is not the case. Therefore promotion is a powerful time to bring up the opportunity of coaching. In this case you are setting the context that both acknowledges the person's leadership potential and shows them you are providing the support necessary to assist in their transition to becoming a successful leader.

- During a performance review when strengths as well as developmental challenges are mutually acknowledged.

The performance review cycle is a perfect time to address potential coaching opportunities because developmental expectations are openly examined. In this case either an offer of support can be made or a request received for support to address the development of the individual leader.

- Following an executive planning retreat when leaders have taken on key parts of an initiative

As with all immersion experiences, strategic planning retreats can be a powerful springboard towards creating breakthroughs in business performance and results. Unfortunately, many times without ensuring that the executive team will remain focused on the new plan and take consistent actions towards implementing it, the results that are expected are rarely realized.

Applying coaching for the leadership team and individual executives following such a retreat can maximize the investment you have made in the off-site. Individual coaching can be used to help the executives who will be participating in the implementation of the strategic plan maintain focus on their roles and responsibilities as outlined in the plan. Such coaching can additionally provide leadership development opportunities for these executives.

Also, implementation of executive team coaching can improve overall performance of the group as the move forward in implementing the strategy.

These are a few of the most powerful contexts that open coaching as a possibility for development. The goal is to create positive entry ways to apply coaching to ensure the opportunity is best taken care of and produces the greatest outcomes for the individual and organization.

Assign a sponsor

Assigning a sponsor to the executive being coached serves to fuse the coaching to the performance expectations. As we mentioned earlier, the individual's manager is usually the best choice for this sponsorship. An added benefit to making the manager a sponsor is the opportunity created for improving the relationship between the person being coached and their manager. At the very least, making sure this sponsorship connection is in place between the executive and their boss improves the communication and alignment within the organization.

There may certainly be some circumstances when the manager might not be an appropriate choice. If someone else is chosen we usually recommend that it be a role model more senior in the organization who can serve in this capacity.

Conclusion

The goal of any development program you employ in your organization should be maximizing your investment as well as both organizational and individual performance. Executive coaching has proven itself as an extremely effective leadership development vehicle. Yet, there are certain guidelines that if employed can maximize your results.

1. Avoid the temptation of trying to change problem leaders and focus your investment on your most promising leaders who can most leverage their performance and assist you in building a great organization.
2. Create a vision for executive leadership and focus on results not on problem behaviors
3. Create meaningful measures of success for the executive coaching program that are aligned with the vision and results.
4. Chose a time that would most support the individual
5. Assign a sponsor, preferably the individual's manager, to support the process internally.

If these elements are in place and there is a strong desire to grow and develop in the executive being coached the money you invest in executive coaching bare great fruit.

David Utts is an experienced executive coach with over 20 years experience in business. His company, Executive Skillworks is an executive development firm with global reach that focuses on designing and delivering just-in-time executive development solutions for growing companies who are seeking to build executive development initiatives that generate breakthrough results.

David is also a leader in the field of executive development and serves on the Executive Coaching Committee for the International Coaches Federation (ICF). His work on this committee is dedicated to researching best practices in executive coaching and the development of standards for executive coaches worldwide.

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