

Articles for Managers

Executive Coaching on the Rise

by Ian Cook



Ian Cook, trainer, consultant, keynote speaker and Principal of Fulcrum Associates Inc., helps managers and supervisors get more from their people and teams through modern leadership approaches. Contact Ian to discuss the ideas in this article or to find out about related training programs, facilitation and coaching services, and keynote presentations for your organization.

Isn't it funny what we assume about leaders in senior positions. They no longer have anything to learn about interpersonal relationships or leadership. They have arrived, proof positive of their skill level!

Furthermore, only a fearless few people will give them the honest, useful feedback that self-development requires. The "culture" expects them to be role models and our models are supposed to get it "right." Showing their vulnerabilities is a "no-no," not to be done in front of those who report to them and certainly not advised in front of competitive colleagues on their leadership team. Of course, the CEO is too busy (and often not sufficiently skilled) to help them grow interpersonally.

"Well done coaching yields a high return on investment..."

The fact is that many individuals arrive at the senior level with much still to learn about people. Often they bring to the executive wing styles, habits and beliefs that have worked for them since they were a supervisor. Suddenly these formulae for success no longer work and, in many cases, must be unlearned and replaced with behaviors more in line with modern leadership.

This is why so many organizations today are investing in coaching for their key leaders. The benefits from being coached stem primarily from the leverage that is obtained. When a senior leader operates with a less-than-functional style, its negative impact on performance and morale can reverberate from within the senior leadership team right out through the frontlines to the customer. The good news is that turning this individual's style around will have the same multiplier effect in a positive direction.

What is Coaching?

Coaching is a series of periodic one-on-one consultations, usually with an external resource, over a period of time—typically anywhere from three to eighteen months. Between sessions the "coachee" (whom we will call the "client") applies newly learned approaches at work, receives feedback, then reassesses, and refines his/her behavior accordingly. Coaching is not therapy, however, occasionally a coach may suggest counselling as a promising course of action for deeper seated issues that are blocking effectiveness. Well done coaching yields a high return on investment because the process is totally customized to the "client's" challenges and needs and it maximizes the executive's time off the job.

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The goal of the coaching process is to generate, in the client, effective skills and attitudes that are self-sustaining, selfcorrecting and directly supportive of his or her expected performance results.

When does one engage a coach?

Usually—but not always—it is the individual's boss who initiates the coaching intervention. Typically this is in response to a need to turn around a significant performance problem or to improve an interpersonal skill deficiency that is holding back an otherwise excellent executive. Coaching is also used to prepare someone for a promotion, generally enhance leadership potential, and provide support for a particularly challenging leadership situation (e.g.

managing a major change, inheriting a new department).

On the other hand, Coaching is not always indicated. I would not take on a coaching assignment when the boss has already decided to fire or demote the individual, when there is insufficient time to generate the results required, or where the person is entering a coaching process against his/her will. This latter condition is sometimes a judgment call but my ethical and business bottom-line is that the client must buy in to the process freely and genuinely.

"I believe your coach should be someone who places a high value on—even has a passion for—the growth of others..."

What should you look for in a coach?

Consider the mix of (1) skills, (2) knowledge and (3) attributes of any coaching consultant.

Critical skills are:

- communications (interviewing, listening, feedback, summarizing)
- facilitation (including the ability both to confront and support)
- teaching
- the ability to take a systems perspective (the client does not operate in isolation but as an integral part of complex organizational systems)

Look for *knowledge* in three areas:

1. psychology and human behavior
2. business, management and organizational life
3. how adults learn

The ideal *attributes* in the coach you select include:

- flexibility
- work experience and maturity
- self-confidence
- confidentiality
- comfort with complexity

- ambiguity

I believe your coach should be someone who places a high value on—even has a passion for—the growth of others and who is willing to learn and grow himself/herself in the process. And, of course, the relationship must work for both parties, client and coach.

"...those who aspire to excellence understand the value of coaches"

Some coaches are clinically trained, that is, they are psychologists or professional therapists. This is not necessary but neither is it negative. Clinicians bring a deep understanding of human behavior and effective interpersonal techniques. They are trained to recognize deeper pathology should it become evident during the process. As long as they have a solid understanding of business and organizations and they stick to coaching, certainly do consider them for coaching.

What does a coaching process look like?

Each intervention is unique but let's look briefly at a typical sequence.

1. Coach meets with the client's boss and the client to ascertain issues, objectives and the standards expected by the organization.
 2. Coach and client meet. In this meeting I particularly check out our chemistry and my client's degree of buy-in to the overall process. Once that is confirmed, I conduct an in-depth interview with him/her to scope in detail his/her personal and work background, version of the issues, feelings, needs, concerns, and how the client currently perceives and interprets his/her world.
 3. Data gathering. This may involve interviews with key players in the team, the client's direct reports, and others who interact with him/her. Often a 360 degree feedback instrument is used to obtain perceptions from the client's
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boss, peers, and subordinates. Psychological measurements also can contribute a lot. I routinely use the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® with great success. Another technique is to “shadow” the client and observe him/her in typical interactions and meetings.

4. Coach compiles all this information, feeds it back to the client, and facilitates a discussion—sometimes lengthy and emotional.
5. Client identifies and commits to specific objectives and deliverables for the process.
6. Client develops an action plan.
7. With the on-going involvement of the coach, the client implements the plan over an appropriate number of months. This is the core of the process.

8. Once the plan has been accomplished, client and coach conduct a final assessment of the client’s progress against the objectives. Here we may determine the need to gather data once again to confirm others’ perceptions and experience of the progress made.
9. Finally, a ninth step might be contracted where the coach checks in occasionally over the next year or so to provide on-going support.

When we look to the world of athletics and entertainment we see that those who aspire to excellence understand the value of coaches. The seasoned masters in my field of professional speaking certainly use them. I have several coaching colleagues amongst whom we coach one another.

What about your key people? What about you?

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