

Coaching as a Collaboration

YOU DON'T HAVE to be an athlete, a public speaker, or an actor to need your own performance coach. Now, many top business executives are turning to personal coaches to help them polish and improve their business skills and acumen.

In this month's "Training 101," we explore the role of coaching as a collaboration. Since a coaching relationship can last several months to several years, it's important that the coach and the executive learn and grow together.

In the first article, Robert Wither spoon and Randall P. White examine the many roles of a coach and how these roles can facilitate an executive's growth. The authors emphasize that coaching executives focuses less on teaching and more on helping them become their best. In the second, Peggy Hutcheson identifies 10 tips designed to move a coach away from trying to control a session to allowing the client to take a fair share of responsibility.

EXECUTIVE COACHING: WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU?

BY ROBERT WITHERSPOON AND RANDALL P. WHITE

WE ALL WANT TO PERFORM better. In the beginning, improving performance is relatively easy. Learning some new skills, applying new technologies, and just plain experience seem to do the trick. As high performers move up the ladder of success, however, squeezing out that extra ounce of performance becomes increasingly difficult. For many, coaching is the answer.

For decades, athletes, public speakers, and actors facing a similar dilemma have turned to coaches to help them perform better. Often, these individuals have already reached the top of their profession. The coach's role, therefore, is not as a teacher, but as a partner who intro-



duces the high performer to new challenges, options, and behaviors.

Now this approach has taken hold in the business world, where top performers are turning to executive coaches to help them reach their personal best in business. According to *Fortune's* survey of leading companies, those coached in business "may be anyone from a \$60,000 middle manager up to the CEO, although more commonly that person will be a leading contender for the CEO's job." These coaching candidates are valued people who are motivated to perform even better.

Because executive coaching targets high performers, the focus is less on teaching new techniques than on helping the executives become their best. Those who coach are typically skilled outside consultants who collaborate with executives on a regular basis. These relationships may last a few months to several years, during which time a coach provides the constructive feedback and wise counsel an executive needs.

Feedback—the coach's stock in trade—ranges from active listening to formal reports about an executive's behavior and blind spots. Executives (just like the rest of us!) are often unaware of the impact of their actions on others. Feedback gives the executive a snapshot of these important tendencies and helps to change behavior as a result.

Executive coaching goes far beyond collecting raw data, however. For example, to be successful at lead-

ing a booming business (or to fail at turning around a chaotic operation) may tell the executive nothing. Most useful learning lies in examining how a situation was managed, what available resources were used, and how things might have been done differently. By asking tough questions, the coach and the executive learn lessons from experience and practical insights to prepare for future leadership roles. This personal learning process is the essence of executive coach-

ing. Because executive coaching is so personal, no two situations are alike. But the following scenarios serve to better illustrate the coach's role.

When it's lonely at the top. Leading a business or major business function can be lonely. Issues such as the executive's own growth and development, working relationships with the executive team, or specific business challenges can be highly confidential. But these matters are also important enough to merit the rare opportunity to discuss them, think out loud, and receive constructive feedback. As an objective outsider and "talking partner," a coach is free to question the executive on major issues, an option less open to corporate insiders. Often, a coach also helps the executive to obtain valid data to address specific issues or concerns.

Good coaching can lead to

- ▶ **Better decisions.** Experienced coaches offer insight and perspective on an executive's ideas. Talking through actions before they are implemented tends to improve the chances for sound decisions.

- ▶ **More ideas and options.** A coaching environment encourages creative suggestions from both the executive and the coach. An exchange occurs without risk. One creative idea often sparks another.

- ▶ **Better support for the executive's agenda.** Coaching sessions start with the executive's agenda. Coaches are free to offer suggestions, but the coaching format ensures that execu-

tives address the issues and concerns that matter most to them.

When there's pressure to improve. Today's turbulent environment demands more from executives. As goals, roles, and business conditions change, executives must learn new skills and hone their old ones. The reasons for performance coaching can range from stretching "seasoned hands" to sharpen their current skills, to capitalizing on "stars" by keeping them challenged, to correcting the behavior of poor performers. In any case, the executive coach acts as a "performance coach."

Specifically, the coach helps the executive to assess his or her performance, to obtain confidential feedback on individual strengths and weaknesses, and to learn new skills and behaviors. These coaching sessions typically focus on performance in the present job, although improvement may well lead to future positions.

When there's pressure to improve, coaching leads to

- ▶ **Clearer goals and roles.** Coaching helps the executive step back from daily operations to size up the situation and determine the difference between goals and reality—the distance between where the individual is and where he or she wants to be.

- ▶ **Better self-awareness.** Coaching helps the executive discover individual strengths, weaknesses, and possible behavior problems. Better self-awareness develops quickly through being coached. The feedback data and coaching sessions reveal priority areas for improvement and motivate executives to take action.

- ▶ **Better support for performance improvement.** Coaching is just-in-time learning, with little loss of time from being away from the job. Coaches recommend learning resources that are tailored to immediate needs. Executives apply their new skills and behaviors promptly.

- ▶ **Shared goals for success.** Coaching helps executives and their organizations to clarify the skills and competencies for success in a leadership role.

- ▶ **Better discovery of developmental needs.** Coaching helps an executive discover strengths and weaknesses, determine where growth is needed, and decide how to fill the gaps. In the

process, executives discover their developmental needs for future jobs.

- ▶ **Better support for continuous development.** Coaching helps an executive prepare for advancement. Coaching also provides an opportunity for an executive to reflect on life experiences, clarify future goals, and plan for continuous development.

Getting started with coaching. Coaching helps executives solve their own problems and grow to new levels of performance and maturity. Coaching also keeps key people motivated and involved. Unless careful thought goes into choosing a coach, however, many of these benefits may never materialize. Choosing a coach should start with one's needs. Does the executive need a confidant? To learn a new skill? To perform better in the present job? To prepare for a future leadership role? Often these needs and the coaching "fit" can be clarified in an initial exploratory meeting. Many coaches, for instance, specialize in one kind of service.

Beyond matching skills and needs, however, personal chemistry is an integral part of any coaching relationship. Executive coaching will fail if communication is not open and clear. A coach who misunderstands basic business issues or makes impractical suggestions will not be able to gain the trust of and build rapport with a business executive. For coaching to really succeed, the executive must feel confident that the coach is a valuable resource, able to assist him or her in reaching important goals.

Helping executives to achieve their goals is what executive coaching is all about. A good coach helps create an environment where the executive learns how to learn, is motivated and involved, and receives the support he or she needs to succeed. Thus coaching goes beyond most training and instruction. A partnership between executive and coach fosters personalized development that encourages business executives to make the most of their unique abilities.

Indeed, our concept of coaching is about bringing out the best in the people. The very first use of the word "coach" in English occurred in the 1500s to refer to a particular kind of carriage. (It still does.) Hence, the root meaning of the verb "to coach" is to

convey a valued person from where he or she is to where he or she wants to be. That's still a good definition for coaching executives today.

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TEN TIPS FOR COACHES

PEGGY G. HUTCHESON

COACHING IS MAKING the "most wanted" list of skills for more and more businesses. As teams become a primary means for accomplishing work and flatter organizations increase the need for bringing out the untapped potential in everyone, coaching has emerged as a skill every manager, team leader, and, perhaps, even team member needs. Though coaching may not be as easy as it sounds, everyone can become an effective coach. Here are 10 tips gleaned from the experiences of successful business coaches.

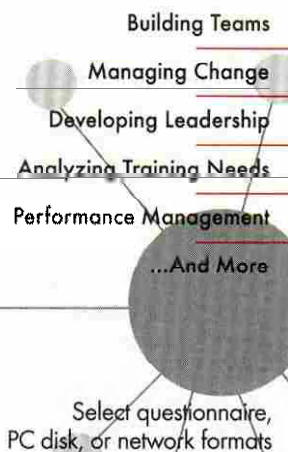
Accept that the coach is not in control. Just as the tennis coach does not hit the ball him- or herself, the business coach does not control the coaching conversation. The best results occur when the person being coached sets his or her coaching goal and takes the lead in accomplishing that goal.

Listen. Even though this skill is included in virtually every interpersonal skills course, most of us still have not mastered it. A good coach is able to listen with full attention, taking in information that leads to insightful questions and genuine understanding. Doing this requires listening at levels most people are not accustomed to. An effective coach creates a mental picture of the situation from the other person's perspective.

Pay attention to what is not being said, as well as to what you hear. The detective model of coaching comes in handy. Keep looking for "one more thing" to be curious about as you piece together all the parts of the puzzle. Don't hesitate to point out something that you still do not understand.

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Listening between the lines can move the coaching discussion from a superficial performance or development discussion to a deeper, more meaningful level.

Probe for information without conducting an inquisition. This is a matter of style and form. Questions such as, "Why would you do that?" can sound pretty threatening. "Tell me a little more about your thinking behind that," is an invitation to explore. The coach's work is to find what is interfering with the other person's ability to accomplish what he or she wants. Pulling information by using open-ended questions is far more effective than pushing with leading questions or requiring an accounting of someone's efforts or behavior.

Coach, don't judge. As a coach, when you evaluate an idea or behavior as good, bad, right or wrong, you may be arriving at a solution too soon, thereby depriving the person you are coaching of problem solving. Instead, ask the person about the likely consequences of one course of action over another. This helps your client gain a sense of reality and the commitment to follow through on the actions selected.

Guide the other person to his or her own solutions. This does not mean that you should ask leading questions. For example, "Don't you think you should try this approach?" may be a good tip for the person you are coaching, but it does little to empower him or her to discover solutions. Instead, "Tell me what you've thought of," opens the door for exploration and ownership of the result.

Suspend your expertise. You do not have to know the answer to be a good coach. In fact, it is usually difficult for a technical expert to withhold opinions and solutions enough to coach well. Instead, in a team environment, someone who knows little about the technical aspects of product development may be the most effective coach for a design engineer who feels stuck. Without being encumbered by a need to understand the technical "symptoms," the coach can help the engineer uncover the causes behind the problem.

Monitor your own beliefs. As you coach, it is easy to let past experiences with the other person or doubts about yourself get in the way. For example,

during the discussion, you may remember that the person you are coaching has let you down in the past, or you may feel frustrated because you believe you should have smart options to suggest. Some of the beliefs that coaches often need to confront include: I should have the answers; You are bright (or stupid); I'm a great (or poor) coach. Excellent coaching occurs when you are able to put aside what you believe about your roles, the other person's ability, and the situation you are discussing. This opens the way for you to guide the other person to examine these beliefs realistically.

Watch what you are doing. The old adage, "Stupid is as stupid does," applies to coaches, too. Subtle, or not-so-subtle, behaviors from a coach communicate more to the person being coached about what you really believe and expect from coaching than any words you may use. Credibility as a coach comes with using coaching skills over time, honoring confidentiality and commitments, and handling all information with integrity.

Use a structure for the coaching session. A simple mental model helps facilitate the conversation and prevents you from getting sidetracked. The model should

- ▶ help the other person create a clear goal for the coaching session
- ▶ give both of you a complete picture of what is currently happening in regard to the goal
- ▶ provide an opportunity to generate a number (often the larger, the better) of options for closing the gap between what's happening now and what the client wants
- ▶ establish commitment to pursue the next steps.

Paying attention to these 10 tips does not ensure that you will become a world-class coach. What it will do is move you further along the continuum from needing to tell to needing to ask. It will also move you from wanting to control the results to wanting to empower others by helping them own responsibility for what they do.

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