

Wanted: Chief Executive Coach

BY LYNDA MCDERMOTT

Leaders limit their influence when they ignore the crucial role of coaching. The best leaders coach, and the best coaches receive some coaching themselves.

Here's the why, what, and how about executive coaching.

IF YOU HAVEN'T YET PLACED a help-wanted ad or called executive recruiters, you had better hurry: Coaching is a management imperative. The ad might read like this:

Wanted: chief executive coach. Will ensure that the company develops workers to operate at their full potential. Under this person's direction, employees will abide by the motto "Learn and Change or Die," and the company will enjoy competitive success.

Based on years of working with senior executives, I don't think that such an ad—even in the *Wall Street Journal*—would attract a flood of applicants, let alone anyone who met the qualifications. Most senior execu-

tives view their primary roles as protecting and enhancing shareholders' value, establishing corporate strategy, and avoiding litigation, bankruptcy, and prosecution.

"Coaching peers and associates" isn't on their job descriptions. Despite the need for executives to take on the role of coach, I hope that coaching doesn't become the latest management fad because it's too important for that.

Why executives won't coach

Here are some scenarios I've experienced as an HR professional that exemplify executives' "coaching avoidance":

On a Friday afternoon, a senior

utility executive called me and began describing several disappointing incidents that had occurred with one of the people who reports directly to him—scenes that he had either observed directly or that had been brought to his attention. After a lengthy discussion in which we explored the options for dealing with the issue, the executive decided to talk through the incidents with and counsel the employee. But I sensed that he was thinking, "Why should I have to do this?"

In another case, a vice-president decided to provide a recently promoted manager with a communications coach to help the new manager improve his public speaking

and corporate image, even though the VP knew that the conversation would be uncomfortable.

In both cases, the executives reluctantly stepped up to the coaching plate. I've advised other executives in similar situations, and I have seen a pattern. A staff member—often the same age as the executive or older with tenure—isn't meeting expectations. Save luck, the situation could be reversed. Because the employee's behavior isn't illegal, immoral, or life-threatening, the executive puts off the confrontation. But the behavior continues, the relationship begins to strain, and the executive asks me, "Can you work with Joe?"

What's wrong with this picture?

In a recent survey of consultants and upper-level executives, my company asked, "Do you see evidence that executives resist coaching?" Ninety percent said "yes." The reasons fall into these categories:

- ▶ skills. "I'm uncomfortable with coaching." "I don't know how to coach."
- ▶ role conflict. "I have too many other demands on my time." "Development's not my job."
- ▶ values. "You make your own bed."

If these executives are leaders, why don't they see developing effective followers as their job? In looking for the answer, I reflected on the key characteristics of the best sports coaches. They operate comfortably from the sidelines. They're passionate about the game. They derive deep satisfaction from developing game plans and cultivating players to execute those plans. In effect, they create learning organizations with continuous practice, hands-on simulations, and video-based feedback. They hold players accountable for scoreboard performance, but they also bench players for breaking ranks with team values. They know they may win in the short-term with individual superstars but that over time, they need a fully functioning team.

Sports coaches focus primarily on their players—motivating, drilling, and strategizing with them. They spend little time on administrative tasks and marketing, except for periodic media appearances. Business CEOs, on the other hand, typically

devote less time and attention to their players and more time in meetings with peers, bosses, financial analysts, and key customers.

For example, an experienced manager took over a plant with old equipment and a new group of young managers. Realizing that he had to pull them together into a strong team, he initiated a series of leadership and teambuilding sessions. In addition to identifying certain actions for improving the plant, team members said that they wanted the seasoned manager to coach them so that they could learn from his experience. He begged off for six months, saying that the employees "should learn how to run the place by themselves."



■ *To motivate executives to coach, they must see that the time and patience are worthwhile* ■

So, why won't business leaders coach? Perhaps they don't want to be on the sidelines; they want to be out front. They don't want to nurture and empower; they want to direct and control. Maybe they aren't comfortable in the coaching role. Or, they don't want to participate in the unglamorous process of guiding, praising, and critiquing. But executives who have had positive coaching experiences—either as a coach or a player—report several benefits. One respondent to our survey said, "My role is to make others successful. I don't need credit for the good ideas of others." Executives who responded to our survey also cited these benefits of coaching:

- ▶ clarifies issues and expectations
- ▶ creates an environment for solving problems instead of avoiding them
- ▶ provides personal satisfaction by

contributing to others' growth

- ▶ opens up mutual dialogue to improve work relationships, productivity, quality, and creativity
- ▶ nurtures others' self-esteem and confidence, eliciting more and better contributions from employees
- ▶ builds employees' commitment and loyalty
- ▶ raises the organization's performance bar
- ▶ encourages employees' continuous personal development.

But even the best coaches can't put points on the scoreboard or make changes happen on their own. Employees must accept ownership of their performance. In turn, coaches can learn from listening to and watching others perform. But to motivate executives to coach, they must see that the time and patience are worthwhile, personally and organizationally. Otherwise, no amount of training or exhortation will get them to embrace the role.

What makes a good coach

When asked "What makes a good manager?" Tommy Lasorda—head coach of the Los Angeles Dodgers for 20 years—said, "Managing is like holding a dove. Squeeze it too tight, and you kill it. Open your hand too much, and you lose it. My responsibility is to get 25 guys playing for the name on the front of their shirts and not the one on the back."

According to Webster, a coach is "a person who instructs or trains." We have sports coaches, voice coaches, piano teachers, fitness instructors, and dog trainers—all coaches. Many of them have replaced the word "teacher" with "coach," perhaps because most of us remember teachers as people who stood in front of a classroom and asked us to take tests. Now, we want instruction and feedback from people who understand how to help us learn.

Two years ago, I decided to learn how to play the piano. As an adult learner, I dreaded the idea of scales and lessons from a big red book. But at the start of every lesson, my piano coach asked, "So, how do you want to fall in love with your piano in the next hour?"—or some other agenda-free phrase. That's a lesson to be

learned. As coach, an executive's role is to help "coachees" express where they are and where they want to be, and then help them get there. It's a mutual process of development.

Recently, we asked some senior-level professionals to identify the characteristics of an ideal coach. They said that a good executive coach is someone who

- ▶ is highly regarded and successful in the organization
- ▶ works closely enough with employees to observe their behavior in a variety of situations with diverse individuals and at many organizational levels
- ▶ respects individuals and is able to work with them in a supportive, non-judgmental way
- ▶ has expertise in an area that employees want to improve in their own performance
- ▶ understands the organization's culture and how employees' behavior is evaluated within that culture.

No one will possess all of these characteristics. But the closer a coach comes to this description, the more effective he or she will be. Such coaches can help others examine their strengths and areas in need of improvement. They can help people identify the changes they must make in order to foster their own growth. And they can help develop the required approaches.

Don Shula—former head coach of the Miami Dolphins with the only undefeated season in pro-football history—was asked what helped him get through tough times with his players. "You need convictions," he said, "and open communication at all times." Shula's mission was to be the best—to win within the rules, with class. Another coach, Phil Jackson of the championship Chicago Bulls, demonstrates that there's no best coaching style. In contrast to the "take no prisoners" approach of Pat Riley, former coach of the L.A. Lakers and N.Y. Knicks, Jackson bases his coaching philosophy on Zen Buddhism to get superstars to see that the power of the team is greater than the sum of its parts. Using such coaching tools as spiritual poetry, he challenges players to drop the brute intimidation and "me first" talk. He even convinced superstar Michael Jordan to share in the coaching role.

Sports coaches often pace the sidelines and yell, seemingly eager to play the game themselves. Many were great players, but they're forbidden to go out onto the field. Unfortunately, executives don't have the same rule. Instead of micromanaging, perhaps they should position themselves as coaches on the sidelines.

Coaxing executives to coach

How do we convince executives that coaching is part of their job description? One way would be to tie executive compensation to coaching performance. But we don't want mandated coaching. The best coaching I've seen is when the coach receives some

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WHY EXECUTIVES WON'T COACH

Based on the results of a survey of consultants and top executives, here are some reasons executives resist coaching:

- ▶ fear or discomfort with confrontation
- ▶ rate it as a low priority
- ▶ requires too much time and patience
- ▶ concern that they'll appear weak in having hired or promoted the employee
- ▶ don't want to spend time developing employees
- ▶ think that the person being coached will be insulted and resistant
- ▶ expect others to figure things out for themselves
- ▶ don't know how to coach
- ▶ are more self-centered than other-directed
- ▶ are unaware of the benefits of coaching
- ▶ think that coaching shouldn't be necessary at a certain level
- ▶ think it's difficult to coach people of same age and pay level
- ▶ aren't held accountable for performing a coaching role
- ▶ don't see the value
- ▶ think it's easier to ignore, circumvent, or terminate problem employees
- ▶ think that they'll solve the problems themselves and get credit
- ▶ think it's HR's role.

THE IDEAL COACH

Here's how senior-level professionals who responded to a survey describe the ideal coach:

- ▶ creates a relationship that isn't forced or contrived
- ▶ develops trust and mutual respect
- ▶ provides goals and honest information
- ▶ takes time to develop relationships by showing a personal interest in employees' development
- ▶ shows empathy for personal and professional issues
- ▶ provides specific guidance on both personal and business issues
- ▶ leads by example; works at improving his or her "needs development" areas
- ▶ doesn't force his or her own goals on employees; doesn't push his or her own agenda through employees
- ▶ paints the big picture
- ▶ talks *with* employees, not *to* them
- ▶ provides specific performance criteria
- ▶ is comfortable and secure; lets people grow
- ▶ provides informal feedback, not just a checklist
- ▶ helps employees plan for improvement.

coaching on how to coach. Sun Microsystems CEO Scott McNealy admits to having sought the advice of an external coach to help him coach his staff members.

A coach-the-coach approach can help guide executives toward the coaching role, instead of just adding a new item to their job descriptions. A senior vice-president bemoaned to me that he was only a few years from

retirement and couldn't visualize any of his managers becoming his successor. So, he and I discussed each manager's potential. The VP realized that he wasn't giving the managers opportunities to perform their duties while he coached from the sidelines. We outlined a game plan, and he began creating time in his schedule for heart-to-hearts with each manager. Six months later, the VP said that he

liked the new role of coach, though he admitted that it took time to let go of the reins. He even began to see one of the managers blossoming into a potential successor.

Here are some ways to initiate a coach-the-coach effort:

- ▶ Suggest that executives use 360-degree feedback in their teams, including the executives themselves. This will give the executives information about their leadership and coaching, as well as create a forum for open dialogue among team members on their inter-relationships.
- ▶ Suggest that each member of an executive team select a buddy (a peer) to help him or her work on a particular skill area. The top executive can work with a team member (preferably) or with an external coach.
- ▶ Provide "training camps" of short, skill-building sessions on such topics as active listening and constructive feedback.

Too often, coaching replicates the parental, military, or bureaucratic models that are hierarchical rather than lateral. The new coaching requires executives to shift from dispensing advice to a "performance partnership" with the goal to improve organizational and individual effectiveness. As teams take on a more important role in organizations, we reject the "I'm in charge" types in favor of executives who behave more like facilitators.

Not all executives can become chief executive coaches. But if they neglect this critical role, they limit their leadership influence. Perhaps they just need a gentle reminder, such as the one on Superbowl champion coach Barry Switzer's desk, inscribed on a clear block of crystal: "There is no limit to what can be done if it doesn't matter who gets the credit." ■

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