

Finding a Needle in a Haystack: What You Wish You Knew About Selecting an Executive Coach

As a part of an organization's performance management system, many organizations are utilizing one-on-one executive coaching as a tool to develop leaders at the upper echelons of the organization. While executive coaching is becoming increasingly more popular, there is not a one-size-fits all approach to coaching (Tamir & Finfer, 2017). This raises some questions: What should clients seeking an executive coach look for in a coach? How does one assess fit with the coach? What exactly does a coach help accomplish?

A Little Bit of Self-Reflection is Worth It

It may be tempting to quickly choose a coach, especially if the client is eager to get the ball rolling. However, taking the time to think through what goals one wants to accomplish as a function of participating in the coaching engagement will likely prove of value (Allen, Manning, Francis, & Gentry, 2011). Does the client want feedback to help create a concrete, action-oriented development plan? Does the client need clarity in identifying his or her goals, values, and desires? Does the client need to develop specific skills, such as communication? By identifying what professional and personal areas they would like to develop as a result of coaching, clients will be able to make a well-informed decision when selecting a coach (Peterson, 2010). Certain coaches may specialize in or have a lot of experience in coaching to particular development areas.

Chemistry, Chemistry, Chemistry!

Fit between the client and executive coach matters. Fit with personality, learning style, communication style, and receptivity to feedback are just a few domains of fit which impact the client-coach relationship (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Lambert & Barley, 2002). "The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior", is an adage which suggests that clients can identify future fit with a coach by asking the prospective coach about their past coaching experiences and approaches. Questions to ask a prospective can include:

- Tell me about yourself. What are your hobbies/interests, career goals, etc.?
- Do you have any coaching credentials?
- What is your coaching philosophy?
- How do you use data and feedback as a part of the coaching process?



- To what extent are other key stakeholders involved in coaching?
- What are some specific coaching success stories?
- What type of coaching clients do you tend to work best with?
- What are some specific coaching failure experiences?
- What are some ethical dilemmas that you have faced while coaching? How were these dilemmas resolved?

In addition to assessing fit, these questions also provide information about the coach's qualifications and expertise. Unqualified coaches have the potential to do more harm than good (Sherman & Freas, 2004). Different coaches have different experiences, training, and education, and consequently, different coaching skills and strengths. Therefore, it is important that the client properly vets the prospective coach while bearing in mind the forces driving the need for the coaching relationship.

End Game: Fostering Executive Independence

While fit between a client and coach is critical to a successful coaching relationship, chemistry has the potential to become a double-edged sword. That is, clients may unintentionally become overly dependent on the coach for guidance. However, a healthy coaching relationship is one that will not trigger over-reliance on the coach. Rather, the coach should foster a relationship that enables the client to become independent in assuming responsibility for their thoughts and actions even after the coaching relationship concludes.

References & Suggestions for Further Reading

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