

If Coaching Is the Answer, What Is the Question? Part I

By Linda Clark-Santos, Ph.D. and Lloyd Longnion

The field of executive coaching has exploded in recent years and, in some cases, is eclipsing other methods of developing future leaders. In fact, search results for the term “executive coach” or “executive coaching” can easily yield over a million sources—including some get-rich-quick schemes offering the potential to “earn” hundreds of dollars per hour. Some firms require or offer a certification process, but generally speaking, executive coaching is an unregulated field. As a result, just about anyone can declare him/herself an executive coach and solicit business. With the pressure of a shrinking pool of leadership talent, some organizations are counting on executive coaching to serve as a short cut to developing the next generation of leaders quickly. Tempted by the quick-fix appeal of coaching, these organizations may turn away from more traditional (and time-consuming) ways to develop leaders. Without careful consideration, these organizations may waste money, be disappointed with the results and unknowingly increase liability and risk. Understanding the clear “why” and developing a clear “how” can avoid these pitfalls.

First, the “why.” In our view, coaching requests arise from two major needs:

1. remediation of a poor performer and
2. accelerated development of a high potential.

The first poses the question, “Can this person (or his/her performance) be fixed?” The request for coaching may be driven by various objectives on the part of the individual’s manager:

1. To confirm the manager’s assessment of individual’s performance
2. To avoid providing direct corrective feedback
3. To stage a dramatic intervention to turn the performance around.

The third--that is, the sincere effort to improve the individual’s performance--is really the only valid reason to call on a coach. In the first two cases, the manager may be unskilled or unwilling to address the performance issue alone. If so, the issue at hand is really more the competence and courage of the manager rather than the legitimate need for a coach. If several managers in an organization are calling on coaches in order to avoid their tough managerial duties, the need is really for management training in dealing with performance issues rather than in external coaches.

If, however, there is a legitimate wish to offer coaching as a means to turn the performance around, here are some guidelines to consider in developing a clear coaching contract:

1. Roles: What are the roles of the coach, the manager, the coachee, and HR? Who, really, is the customer?
2. Finite timeframe: How long is the coaching engagement to last? Are there opportunities to extend or not? If yes, what are the triggers to extend or renew?
3. Clear outcomes: What results are expected? What would signal success and call for closure of the engagement?
4. Confidentiality: Who owns the data and information arising from the coaching sessions?
5. Fees: What are the fees and who pays?
6. Frequency and availability: How often is the coach expected to engage? What are the expectations about availability? Is the coach expected to be “on call”?

In the next installment, we will cover the second “why” of coaching: the accelerated development of a high potential.

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If Coaching Is the Answer, What Is the Question? Part II

By Linda Clark-Santos, Ph.D. and Lloyd Longnion

In our last article, we began the discussion of the “why” and “how” of the use of coaching in executive development. As discussed in Part I, the use of executive coaching is growing rapidly while the actual results of these interventions are mostly unmeasured. A recent survey by McKinsey indicated that executives attributed only about 4 to 6% of their career growth to using a coach. So why is coaching at this level growing at such a fast pace?

In Part I we outlined the reasons so many organizations are using coaches today. We described the first use as being to address performance problems. The second coaching engagement poses quite a different question: “Can the development of this talented person be accelerated?” In these cases, the coaching engagement can and should be quite different than the remedial situation. High potentials are generally not “owned” by the manager but instead the organization itself is the “owner” of the talent. Consequently, it may not be the manager of the talented individual who calls for a coach. Rather, the coaching engagement may be sponsored by executives higher in the organization. As a result, the contracting process may be more complex and confusing.

Here are some key considerations in engaging a coach to work with high potentials:

1. Context for the coaching: The coaching engagement might best be positioned as a follow-on to a leadership program or assessment process in which the individual has identified development needs based on data (not just previous performance reviews).
- 2.
3. Timeframe: While the coaching engagement may not have a specific and limited timeframe, it is wise to craft a contract with clear triggers for renewal or extension.
4. Outcomes: The objectives should be customized based on the individual’s development needs. These objectives are more general and future-oriented in nature and not tied to performance in current role.
5. Fit: Positive “chemistry” between the coach and coachee is critical. Allowing the coachee to interview prospective coaches and participate in the selection may prevent false starts and wasted time.
6. Confidentiality and roles: It is critical to determine what degree of confidentiality can be expected and to identify “chain of custody” of the information arising from the sessions. Clearly, the roles of the manager, the sponsoring executive, and HR must all be considered and addressed.

In the next installment, we will address the “how.” We will offer ways to ensure desired results from the coaching process and to reduce risk through thoughtful protocols and careful selection of coaches.

If Coaching Is The Answer, What Is The Question? Part III

By Linda Clark-Santos, Ph.D. and Lloyd Longnion

In Part II we completed a discussion of “why” coaching and provided some insight about the framework on which the “how” could be executed. Let’s start with the importance of a protocol for coaching. To ensure clear communications among all parties in the coaching process, it is imperative they all understand the rules of engagement.

For the Participant

The participant (or coachee) must understand:

1. That this is an engagement for accelerating their development toward a specific, mutually understood goal, usually written into an agreement.
2. That the commitment is time constrained.
3. The level of confidentiality is honored
 - a. between the participant and the coach;
 - b. the coach and the organization sponsor;
 - c. the coach and any other stakeholders in the process.
4. That there is a cost / benefit structure attached to the process.

For the Coach

The coach must understand:

1. The limits of the agreement between the coach, the coachee, the organization sponsor and the other stakeholders.
2. The commitment of time defined in the agreement.
3. The level of confidentiality defined in the organization’s coaching protocol.

For the Organization Sponsor (Manager, Skip-Level Executive)

The organization sponsor must understand the:

1. Roles and responsibilities of all parties in the coaching process.
2. Desired outcomes.
3. Cost / benefit structure of the process.
4. Level of confidentiality of the engagement.
5. Terms of hand-off of coaching engagement results to the sponsor or the organization.

For the Stakeholders

The stakeholders (direct reports, managers, peers, other interviewees) must understand:

1. Purpose of the coaching process (i.e., accelerated development vs. performance fix).
2. Level of confidentiality expected from their involvement in the coaching process.

If all of the roles and responsibilities mentioned above are incorporated in a well-communicated protocol, the organization will increase the benefits and avoid some of the risks involved in executive coaching.

Linda Clark-Santos and Lloyd Longnion began working with large organizations in the Northwest and Southwest regions of the US to design and deliver executive assessment and accelerated development programs in 2006. Before that they each held leadership positions in large multi-national high-tech, aerospace, retail financial services, and distribution companies providing leading edge talent management, executive, leadership and organizational development programs and processes.

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