

Executive Coaching: What's the Big Deal?

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Do you have a coach? Do you know someone who has a coach? If you answered “yes” to either of these questions, then you are somewhat familiar with the biggest buzz in personal and leadership development in the 21st century since training exploded in the 20th century. In 2003, *The Economist* estimated that organizations were already spending upwards of \$1 billion worldwide providing coaches for their employees and expected the growth to double within 2 years (“Corporate Therapy”). A report by Shuit in 2005 estimated there were 40,000 coaches working throughout the world and suggested that the business of coaching in the United States alone had grown to \$1 billion per year. If you have no idea what the big deal about coaching is, then here is a crash course on executive coaching that is sweeping the nation and the world.

Historically, the term “coach,” found in the English language, came from the early 1500s and referred to a type of four-wheeled, horse-drawn carriage. A coach assisted the travel of a person from one location to another. Over the centuries, a coach became an instructor or trainer for individuals: athletes, performers, and public speakers would all use a “coach” to improve their performance. In the 1980s and 1990s, the term coach added another significant meaning; it represented a new relationship between an individual who sought to change a behavior or attitude, reach a desired goal, or improve upon some aspect of their life with the professional help of a trained “coach.” Executive coaching followed shortly with the added dimension of coaching a leader in an organization – ultimately seeking to understand the complexities of the executive’s organizational culture, goals, and climate, and to combine these with the already complex nature of any human being’s home life and relationships. Although one clear definition does not exist, it is generally agreed that executive coaching is a one-to-one interaction between a coach and an executive in a helping relationship offering experiential learning and dialogue that facilitates an executive’s desire to reach specified goals and may affect individual self-, job-, and organization-related outcomes. Ultimately, beyond individual growth and results, the effects of executive coaching are intended to extend to improved organizational performance – hence the reason that organizations, across the United States, are funding this type of interaction that could potentially cost billions of dollars.

Why is Executive Coaching a Big Deal?

Coaching had a bad wrap when it earnestly began in the 1980s. For many years, coaching had been used as a kind of discipline or “last effort” for underachieving executives in the corporate world. Although this is one purpose of coaching, today coaching covers a multitude of purposes. Carter (2001) presented a list of some of these purposes:

1. Coaching supports the induction or appointment of a senior person into a more senior, or different role.
2. Coaching accelerates the personal development of individuals defined as “high potential,” or individuals from a minority group identified for affirmative action.
3. Coaching underpins the effective implementation of organization change, through supporting teams and individuals.
4. The coach is seen as a critical friend or independent sounding board to a senior individual.
5. Coaching supports senior individuals engaged in wider personal effectiveness programs, such as 360-degree appraisal or development centers.

With leadership viewed as a source of competitive advantage in today’s learning organizations shrouded in a culture of constant change, coaching is impacting executives in ways previously disregarded in areas of “soft skill” development.

What are the Outcomes of Executive Coaching?

Most notably, due to the personal and intimate relationship formed in an executive coaching relationship, outcomes occur in areas of individual growth and learning including improved self-awareness, self-efficacy, and sometimes extra-organizational areas like improved work and family balance or other personal relationship management issues. Even though these types of outcomes seem disconnected with organizational goals, all have been shown to improve job satisfaction and, in some cases, organizational performance. Evidently, organizations are paying for coaching services in order to see real return on investment in tangible outcomes such as personal performance and satisfaction, productivity, and organizational effectiveness improvement – all that have been studied as outcomes in the coaching literature over the past decade.

The Nuts and Bolts of Executive Coaching

With an estimated 40,000 coaches in the world, many different executive coaching methodologies exist. To summarize the executive coaching process, it is composed of six common components that can be combined in different orders:

1. Formal Contracting—a form of “contract” or agreement between the coach and executive, or the coach, executive, and the organizational sponsor (if necessary).
2. Relationship Building—sessions dedicated to developing a “fit” between the coach and executive while building mutual trust and respect
3. Assessment—this includes any form of review by the coach of the executive’s strengths, weaknesses, and overall developmental needs

4. Getting Feedback and Reflecting—receiving the results of the assessment and setting the stage for goal-setting
5. Goal-Setting—determining the goals and outcomes that the executive seeks to achieve while in the coaching relationship and developing the action plan to achieve the goals
6. Supportive Implementation and Evaluation—this includes the beginning of the formal coaching sessions, a schedule for evaluating the plan often using specified time frames, and termination (see Figure 1).

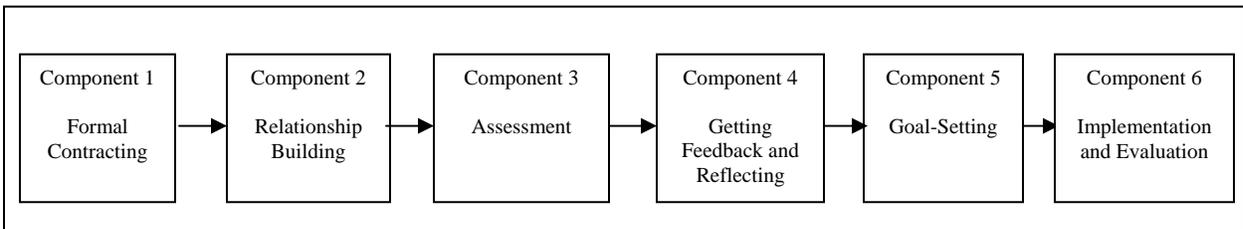


Figure 1. A common 6-component executive coaching process (see Dingman, 2004 for complete details).

The second key to a successful coaching experience is the coaching behaviors of the coach who is trained in (a) interpersonal skills, relating to the structure of the sessions created by the coach; (b) different communication styles, the coach's style of communication and listening skills used to direct conversations relating to the executives' goals; and (c) instrumental support which is defined as attributes of a successful coaching intervention referring to dimensions of how well the coach leads the executive through a successful intervention.

The costs of coaching also fluctuate, but according to Carter's (2001) example from a study in England, coaches charged up to 2000 Euros per day (approximately \$2500 US dollars) while the average daily fee of management consultants was 975 Euros (approximately \$1250 US dollars). Further, coaching is time-specific (a set amount of meetings and length), short-term (typical is 3-12 months in length), goal-oriented, practical, and measurable due to assessments and pre-, mid-, and/or post-session evaluations.

Executive coaching is about the relationship and the interactions between the executive and the coach. The executive drives the agenda with the guide of the coach, but the main goals are always for the coach to ask the right questions to encourage self-awareness in particular areas, not to manipulate the answers or give advice. In a world dominated by work and staying "connected" to your job at all times through technology, it is evident that loneliness exists at the top management level within organizations, and the loss of dialogue and conversation is often regarded as unnecessary means to organizational performance and goals. This is where executive coaching steps in to bridge the gap that is growing in corporate offices across the world: the need to reconnect with the human side of leading; reassess personal behaviors, attitudes, and decisions; and set goals to bring about positive change in a supportive and caring environment—transforming lives one at a time. That is the big deal about executive coaching.

About the Author

Dr. Myra Dingman received her Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership from Regent University and currently serves as the production group manager in the School of Global Leadership and Entrepreneurship at Regent University. Her research interests include coaching, leadership, leader-follower relationships, organization development, and applying biblical principles to organizations.

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