

HUMANEMENT

EXECUTIVE COACHING 101

By Mark Brenner



Several studies have put the return on investment for executive coaching to be between five and 10 times the initial outlay. For example, a 2004 report by Right Management Consultants put the average ROI at nearly six times the investment for the 100 senior executives it surveyed.

But actually, the ROI might be much higher. Published studies are often short-term and capture the ROI for only the most immediate effects of the coaching engagement. If research were to measure the "lifetime solution value" of coaching over the balance of an executive's career, the findings would be staggering.

The reason executive coaching renders such tremendous ROI is that it is the best and perhaps only tool to enhance an emotional intelligence quotient (EQ). The higher an executive rises on the career arc, the more technical expertise recedes as the premier factor of success, while EQ elements " self-awareness, interpersonal finesse, self-mastery, openness to new experiences and leadership acumen " rapidly escalate in importance. These factors are the drivers of competitive edge during ascending managerial and executive careers. And, executives with high EQs are the ones who most measurably contribute to creating high-performance organizations.

The Coach and You

Fortunately, an EQ can be much more easily modified than an IQ, and a seasoned executive coach can create greater proficiency in this vital arena of leadership. This kind of coaching has huge potential for advancing an executive's effectiveness, level of satisfaction, contribution and overall success, but only if the coach can make the development process systematic, disciplined and targeted.

The fundamental challenge in guiding a key contributor to even-greater success begins with recognizing that the refinement of EQ aptitudes is primarily a psychological affair. In other words, coaching is about changing both the attitudes and behavior of an organization's high-value contributors. But how can one adult coax another adult out of his or her well-grooved comfort zone?

Both research and experience demonstrate that it's not something that can be accomplished using traditional education or training. Rather, the coach first needs to instill in a coaching candidate the motivation and courage to move outside the old, habitual grooves. The expertise required to break through a candidate's "comfort zone inertia" may not be rocket science, but it comes pretty close. That's also why an executive coach needs both an advanced degree in the behavioral sciences and the ability to harness adult learning theory to this demanding, behavior-change process. To begin to understand and address the candidate's EQ shortfalls (a.k.a. development opportunities), the coaching engagement starts with:

- A state-of-the-art, objective assessment, such as the Leadership Multi-Rater Assessment of Personality (LMAP)
- Powerful qualitative data from a robust, online 360-degree instrument. The High Performance Competencies Survey (HPCS) captures the voices of the candidate's "audience," or this can also be done less efficiently using face-to-face interviews of the respondents.
- An in-depth, life history interview of the candidate
- Performance review data from the prior couple of years

Together, these assessments create a "data mirror" that reflects a graphic and vivid image of how the candidate is experienced by his or her audience at work. Once the assessment process is complete, the demanding change process can begin. The first challenge is instilling in the candidate a willingness to change. This can only happen if the candidate trusts the coach completely.

Engendering trust in turn requires potent relationship-building skills and the ability to walk in the shoes of both the candidate and the organization's culture, in the manner of a cultural anthropologist. Only when such a strong working partnership is formed with the candidate, as well as with a representative of management, can the coach drive the kind of attitudinal and behavioral changes that will ultimately lead the candidate to substantive and sustained performance enhancement.

Derailment or Success

Once a trusting relationship is established and the candidate is motivated and embraces the process, the next question is: Which EQ competencies need changing? To arrive at this decision, the coach has to know which performance patterns are predictive of derailment or mediocrity and which are predictive of work success.

Typical derailment factors include abrasiveness, conflict aversion, micro-managing and battering others with one's intelligence. Examples of EQ competencies are self-awareness, interpersonal finesse, self-mastery and openness to new experiences. The heart of the coaching process is guiding the candidate toward tapping into and harnessing his or her own inner motivational dynamics. When this happens, the candidate becomes the prime owner and mover of the coaching initiative.

To drive this progression, the coach needs a toolbox of behavior-change techniques that help build the momentum required to achieve significant performance enhancement. The most important among these tools are "behavioral experiments" as the everyday, absolutely essential workhorse of the coaching process.

For example, 360-degree feedback indicated that the candidate's direct reports experienced him as cool and aloof. The executive was stunned by this perception, because he viewed his style as using a laissez-faire management strategy with adults, thinking that less managing was more. However, it became indisputable from the 360 data that the executive was seen as disconnected from and disinterested in his people.

Tools like 360-degree feedback and the behavior experiments that ensue link the step-by-step change process directly to the candidate's work life. They use the individual's work role as the primary medium in which the behavior experiments take place and performance strategies are refined. This is the only way to fight the inertia of the individual candidate's comfort zone.

Throughout the coaching process, the coach needs to provide feedback " both positive and developmental " with great finesse. Both types of feedback are essential to create the optimal level of positive motivation to fuel the change process. Further, because candidates commonly bring emotional baggage to the workplace, as well, the coach also has to be a skilled diagnostician to recognize the source of this baggage and help the candidate control and harness it.

At the same time, the coach has to enhance the candidate's self-awareness and self-monitoring abilities so the candidate can convert un-harnessed emotions to higher-order emotional intelligence. Finally, to make sure the new leadership strategies continue over time, the coach has to build self-sustaining mechanisms into the candidate's performance-enhancement process. At the back-end of this process, an effective goal-setting and action-planning template and methodology are required to ensure that the candidate sets meaningful and measurable performance targets and capitalizes on his or her own long-proven talents and strengths.

EQ Rules!

Peter Drucker, the 20th century's greatest management guru, stated: "Success in the knowledge economy comes to those who know themselves " their strengths, their values, and how they best perform." (Harvard Business Review, March/April 1999) Now, almost a decade later, recent research in EQ has confirmed his belief and has demonstrated that the higher an individual ascends on the career arc, the more critical EQ becomes to everyday success.

But if a coaching candidate and his or her organization are to discover the true power, impact and value of executive coaching in enhancing EQ and leadership performance, the coach has to meet the daunting list of expertise requirements noted above. Once an organization has begun to experiment with executive coaching for its key contributors, it typically becomes a true believer. **USBR**

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