

Executive Coaching



Should You Use an Executive Coach?

If you're really a good manager, you shouldn't need any help. Substitute any other profession for "manager" in that sentence and it becomes clear how absurd the sentiment is. No one would expect Michelle Kwan to skate her way to a gold medal without constant coaching, but we routinely expect business leaders to sail their ships solo. "In other disciplines – theater, politics, or sports, for example – the higher up you get the more you can afford to pay someone to advise you and be in your face all the time," notes Pamela Godwin, president of Change Partners Inc., a leadership and change management consulting firm. "In business, however, the higher up you go the less feedback you receive."

Contrary to popular belief, executive coaching isn't some vague, touchy-feely help-line service or a quick fix for poorly performing employees. A good executive coach focuses on actionable issues and helps managers set clear goals and objectives to be achieved over time. Coaching can be useful for various purposes: to help managers with on-boarding, to groom high-potentials, and to provide thinking-partner support for senior-level executives, among others.

Exactly what can coaches help with? "Coaches can assist people with leadership behaviors, personal productivity, career and life plans, leadership development, and diversity issues," says Godwin. "When someone is coming into an organization or transitioning into a new division, coaching can streamline the integration process and accelerate the learning curve." A typical coaching engagement lasts anywhere from six to twelve months, with checkpoints built in to monitor progress along the way and make course corrections if needed.

Unlocking Potential

Companies' use of coaching has changed over the years, says Godwin. "Five to ten years ago, firms would invest in people who were at risk of failing. While this is still true to a certain extent, more often than not, companies are engaging coaches to better leverage the top 10 to 20 percent of people, employees who may have untapped capacity that is not being accessed. They are often grooming high-potential candidates who are at the top of the middle level of management for positions in the senior ranks."

Once you get to the top levels of management, your competitive edge is in how you use your talent pool, notes Godwin. "It's often helpful for leaders to discuss people issues – what's happening on their board of directors, team dynamics within the company, and so forth."

For a C-level manager, an executive coach can be a brainstorming partner. "Many of these leaders are in a relatively isolated position, and it can be difficult for them to discuss the issues they're facing with team members," says Godwin. "A coach – especially one who has relevant experience in what they're dealing with -- is useful when such executives need to bounce ideas around in a safe environment. They can use a coach to scope out the problems before engaging someone else or to help them develop ideas by thinking out loud." A coach, she notes, can help disengage the emotional aspects of decision-making and help executives approach a task more objectively.

Measuring Up

It all sounds good, but how do you know if a coaching engagement has been successful? The metrics may be qualitative or quantitative depending on the circumstance, says Godwin. If a person is a good executive but is a bad listener, or doesn't make the best decisions because he doesn't take others' input, coaching can be targeted to help change that behavior. "Often, we might do a 360-degree feedback session at the front end, before coaching begins, and then do another six months into the program and one more at the end. That way we can check back with the person's managers and subordinates to evaluate perceived changes," explains Godwin. In some areas, such as sales, financial results may also be used to demonstrate the effectiveness of coaching. Other metrics might be employee satisfaction over time, or retention rates, if coaching was meant to change leadership behaviors that led to high turnover.

What a coach isn't, cautions Godwin, is a replacement for a shrink: "It's not meant to be therapy. Plus, it won't work if the person doesn't want to change." Far from a stigma, however, having an executive coach is often considered a perk, and is usually a sign that a company is willing to invest in a leader's development. "Companies might use it in their succession planning strategies, or to reduce the flight risk of strong performers," says Godwin.

The bottom line? If you think you might benefit from using an executive coach, speak to your manager first to see if your company would support the endeavor; if you prefer more confidential counsel, contact one on your own or get a referral from a trusted friend.

For more information about executive coaching, visit ChangePartnersofPA.com. To learn more about graduate programs at PSGV, [click here](#).