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## ***The Contribution of Coaching***

*Managers in organizations today are under more pressure than ever to deliver the goods. The stress and strain they face is at an all time high. Hard economic times do that. One prominent trend that has come out of this period is the increased use of executive coaching. Coaching that builds trust, gets the facts and addresses organizational realities can contribute to career and business success.*

**The value of coaching** Those of us who do coaching can take pride in its value. It has helped countless managers cope with these pressures and do their jobs better. Coaching has been shown to improve productivity, quality, organizational strength, customer service, and shareholder value.<sup>1</sup>

Companies participating in a recent study reported that coaching returned almost six times its cost.<sup>2</sup> In another study managers who had been coached were compared to managers in a conventional managerial training program. The training increased productivity by 22.4 percent while coaching increased it by 88 percent.<sup>3</sup>

Coaching is an outstanding method for helping individuals improve (and through them increase the effectiveness of their organizations). Whether it's a manager who desperately needs help in building his skills or a high-potential employee who wants to plan her future, coaching is a platform for transformation.<sup>4</sup> The number one challenge in leadership development today is the lack of soft skills in managers who have a technical background.<sup>5</sup> There's nothing like the one-on-one of coaching to build and enhance these kinds of skills.

**Raising the bar on coaching** Now that coaching is in the mainstream of business the bar will continue to be raised. Reportedly, there are 10,000 full- and part-time coaches. The number of coaches entering the field has doubled in size every year for the past three years.<sup>6</sup> Success brings higher expectations. The professionalism of coaching will be placed under the microscope.

**Three essential principles** Coaching practices will need to be built on a very solid foundation of professionalism. While coaching takes many different forms, there are three essential principles that should never be compromised.

- ***Begin with a trusting relationship.*** Matching a coach to the person being coached is essential. It is the most certain way to ensure that coaching gets off to an effective start. Many of my client organizations provide the person to be coached with a panel of coaches from which to choose. My fellow coaches and I agree that going through a selection process is a pain in the neck, especially if you don't get the work, but we also agree that the coach and client must be a good fit. Coaches should encourage their client organizations to use such procedures.

Coaches should say no to assignments when the fit is not right. In one of my recent assignments the CEO gave his CFO responsibility for finding his own coach to ensure that he was satisfied. That turned out to be prescient. At a previous employer, this CFO had worked with a coach who inappropriately revealed confidential and sensitive information to the CFO's management. Needless to say, that coaching relationship went down hill fast and unfortunately didn't achieve the needed results. It goes without saying that without confidentiality there will be no trust.

Getting off to a good start will not guarantee success. I believe there are two other basics ways by which you build trust. First, from the very beginning I try to lock onto the needs of the client, by listening intently to and responding to the aspirations, concerns and problems expressed. I reflect, paraphrase, and carefully probe. In addition to learning a great deal about my client, I show the person that I care and that I'm there for one purpose...to help him. Second, I actively engage as soon as possible in solving problems that confront my clients, help them develop plans that lay out steps important to their success, and address key issues. These two are just the right balance between the soft (caring) and the hard (problem solving).

- **Provide an accurate, objective third-party assessment.** In my mind, assessment is the most valuable step in the coaching process. A tough-minded, third-party assessment delivers the raw material that the client can use to make necessary changes. Collecting, analyzing and feeding data back is at the heart of every ef-

fective coaching intervention. The best coaches see the dynamics of the situation in a clear-headed, objective perspective – and bring that perspective back to the person being coached.

When I start an assessment, I feel like a detective because I'm trying to determine how accurate my client's self-perception of his situation is. I often talk with the client's boss and other key people. I want to find what my client will need to do to bring his performance to the next level and want to find roadblocks interfering with his performance.

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I look for gaps in how these various individuals see my client. Interviews have proven very effective in my work. They allow me to go both specific and broad in my inquiry. Web-based questionnaires are useful for examining work-related issues. In cases where self-perception is particularly weak, using a coaching assessment instrument, such as *Prevue Corporate Coach Assessment*, provides an additional perspective for the client.

Time after time I see the power that feedback data has on fostering change. Not too long ago I had a client who reported back to his team his feedback data. He told the team members what he intended to do and asked for their help. It takes a lot of guts to get up in front of your employees and admit weaknesses. This team rallied behind my client, especially as they saw the resolve of his effort.

My client later reflected on his experience and felt that the objective and comprehensive data he received was key to his having the courage to make crucial changes.

- **Understand how the work to be done fits into the organization.** Good coaching takes into consideration the context of the person being coached. To separate the person being coached from the system in which he is operating repeats the age-old weakness of management training. Traditionally we have sent managers off for training, much of it highly effective. When the managers return, they try to apply what they have learned in an environment that rejects it.

There is an important advantage of coaching. We get up close and personal. If we do our work correctly, we can see factors that will affect the success or failure of our client's effort. As an example, I once learned that the most significant factor influencing my client's boss, the CEO, was another senior manager. This senior manager was frequently putting the most negative spin on the information she provided the CEO about my client. What turned this situation around was my client listening to the senior manager's concerns, adjusting some of her behaviors to suit the senior manager, involving the senior manager earlier in projects, and then keeping communication open. My client kept going back to the senior manager as incidents arose. I was a sounding board for my client as she approached the senior manager and tried out different approaches.

Coaching has the power to transform, both individuals and through them organizations. Such power shouldn't come as any surprise. After all, coaching concentrates directly on an individual and that person's needs. To serve our clients best, we should stay true to basics, including the three discussed in this article. These three principles are essential underpinnings of professional coaching.

#### Notes

1. "Executive coaching yields return on investment of almost six times its cost" from *Business Wire*, January 4, 2001.
2. Ibid.
3. "Maximizing value from executive coaching" by Blaire Palmer in *HR Strategic Review* (volume 2, Issue 6, September/October 2003).
4. "Coaching can be a good thing for organizations and employees alike" in *Training & Development*, February, 2000.
5. "Leadership development survey cites soft skills as major stumbling block" in *CMA Management* 76, no. 7 (October 2002).
6. "Stay in the game (executive coaching)" by Rosemary Levinsky on *Blackenterprise.com*, April 2000.

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