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Executive Coaching

Taking leadership development to the next level.

Committed leaders invest time, effort and financial resources in a variety of leadership development activities to ensure their personal and professional growth. To meet their needs, leadership development programs have evolved from a historical reliance on classroom-type learning, such as seminars and workshops, to an emphasis on 360-degree feedback, action learning, and individual and team coaching. Once used as a last resort to salvage troubled staffers, coaching now also is part of the standard leadership development regimen for many executives and other talented “high potentials.”

Why Executive Coaching?

Often, people will hire a coach when they realize that an obstacle is preventing them from growing further as an executive. Perhaps they are missing a skill, are in a difficult relationship that needs to improve, or have a communication style that interferes with their ability to relate to team members or supervisors. Coaching programs can help a team or an individual achieve greater clar-

ity of vision or purpose and increase self-awareness—a critical component of emotional intelligence and a key characteristic of leadership excellence.

Coaching also can provide a vehicle for inspiring individuals and their teams to challenge their current constraints and to explore new possibilities. The experienced coach will help reveal professional and personal paradigms that may limit an executive’s success, and help clients achieve breakthrough results in the areas that are most important to them and their organization.

For example, the director of nursing for a major healthcare institution had been viewed as aggressive in her communication style. She rushed to solve problems for others instead of engaging them to come up with solutions of their own and collaborating with them. Coaching allowed her to slow down, build buy-in with team members, and not to be so quick to convey her own views before getting the views of her team. She used these tools to enhance her experience as a leader and manager.

Those who seek out coaching are intent on getting to the next professional level. They are already accomplished stars and successful in their career, but they recognize that a coach can accelerate their progress. With coaching, executives find a confidante with whom they can safely explore new ideas and approaches, difficult situations or perceived blocks to accomplishing work and life objectives. Coaches hold their clients accountable for the commitments they make to themselves. They work to bring out the best in their clients on a consistent basis. Because many limitations are self-imposed, a coach can help overcome them. A good coach can assist a client to gain the confidence or skill needed to get the job done effectively.

Recognizing the value of coaching, many organizations send up-and-coming executives through the coaching process to better prepare them for the leadership track. I recently worked with an executive who just had been promoted to head of a large department within his organization.

While technically proficient in his field, he was ill prepared for the “people” aspect of his new role. Realizing that he needed help developing the skills necessary to manage a diverse group, his superiors arranged for him to get executive coaching. During our time together, we worked on getting

him to appreciate his own style of communication and conflict resolution, as well as those within his new team.

Selecting a Coach

The selection of a competent and experienced coach can be a challenge. Many former consultants, corporate “refugees” and licensed counselors have taken up the practice of coaching without the benefit of formal coach training and certification. For example, the International Coach Federation, now representing more than 10,000 coaches worldwide, has formally accredited more than 50 coach training programs. Each program provides foundational skill training for coaches, and many go on to provide a rigorous certification process designed to ensure the competence of the coaches graduating from their program.

Many coaches will demonstrate their skills by offering a complimentary session. Do not be afraid to take advantage of this opportunity. While specific client references are not always available due to the confidential nature of coaching, most experienced coaches will be able to produce a number of clients who have agreed to speak with others about their experiences. When interviewing prospective coaches, ask:

- What is your coaching experience? (number of individuals coached, years of experience)
- Where did you obtain your coach-specific training?
- Do you hold a credential, or are you enrolled in an accredited training program?

- What is your coaching specialty or niche?
- What specialized skills or experience do you bring to your coaching?
- What process or methodology best describes your approach to coaching?
- What are some of your coaching success stories? (specific examples of individuals who have done well and of how the coach has added value)

Sustainability—The Ultimate Coaching Gift

Outside consultants are hired for their particular expertise. Once they do their job, they leave. A relationship with an executive coach, however, is much longer term. Ideally, clients work with their coaches for a minimum of six months, giving them the time not only to tap into the coach’s expertise, but also the opportunity to practice what they have learned. Coaching involves working through the new behaviors and skills, tweaking them until they get it right. If one approach does not work, the coach is still available as a resource.

Some leadership development programs have added a coaching component to their workshops and seminars for this very reason—to lock in the learning. Executives leave these classes with the best of intentions to implement lessons learned. However, many get preoccupied and do not apply the training to their professional and personal lives. Combining the education with coaching adds

cohesion for the “sticking factor” needed to fully integrate the new-found skills into an executive’s repertoire.

The Benefits of Executive Coaching

Clients see measurable differences at the completion of a coaching engagement. Some gain enhanced thinking and decision-making skills while others come away with increased interpersonal proficiency and self-confidence.

Experienced coaches do not shy away from establishing metrics early on in the coaching process, including tracking income/revenue; promotion attainment; productivity; and performance feedback from direct reports, colleagues and bosses.

Bob L. Nardelli, president and CEO, The Home Depot, has said of coaching, “I absolutely believe that people, unless coached, never reach their full potential.” Professional coaching, when delivered by trained and certified coaches, helps clients take more effective and focused actions, creates momentum around results, and becomes more masterful at creating and sustaining relationships. ▲

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