

BEFORE ENGAGING AN EXECUTIVE COACH...

Executive coaching has evolved from stigma ("You're broken.") to status symbol ("You're valuable.") over the past decade. Recognized names in sports, industry and politics have realized the benefits of personal coaches. Many large organizations arrange individual coaches for their high-potential leaders. If they use executive coaches, shouldn't you?

Perhaps.

Executive coaching – individual / personal training in leadership from a professional resource – should be used sparingly for those with promise rather than as a panacea for those with performance problems. How do you decide who is coach-worthy?

Based on the latest research and accumulated experience of coaching professionals, there are a few questions that can be asked prior to engaging a qualified personal coach for a member of your leadership team.

1. What is this person's value – and potential value – to the organization?

Done correctly, executive coaching is expensive and time-consuming. Thus, it should be utilized with individuals who are – or can become – critical to the organization's success. Often, this would include those in C-level assignments, plus heads of business units or functions, and technical or functional experts.

Just how expensive and time-consuming is an executive coach? Although variation exists in fees and arrangements, a useful "rule of thumb" is pay a C-level coach what you pay your top attorney. This is warranted if you consider that a coach must have the experience and expertise to quickly grasp a leader's situation, challenge his/her assumptions and choices, and bring credible, fresh ideas to light. Doing this with an organization's best and brightest is not easy. Given the influence a coach can have on an executive's decisions and actions over the course of a typical six- to twelve-month engagement involving personal meetings, tele-conferences and e-mail check-ins, utilizing a "bargain coach" whose sophistication does not match the client's is a big – and ultimately expensive – mistake.

2. What challenges are confronting the executive right now?

People, relationships, organizations and behavioral change are what executive coaches typically know best. A common coaching assignment arises when an executive is struggling to learn how to best manage herself and engage others.

He might be a CEO trying to figure out how to work with his board chair. Or a regional vice president scaling up to global responsibility, learning how to lead former peers. Or a technical wizard who struggles with communication and collaboration.

An executive coach is not someone who should be used as an extra pair of hands bolstering a weak leader. He/she helps executives think through and tackle their own problems. Self-reliance, not dependency, is the goal.

3. Is the executive ready – motivated – to work with a coach?

The executive must want to change. A bright, motivated executive can face most challenges. A bright, unmotivated executive will waste everyone's time and money. Working with an executive who has been pressured into coaching by the organization is an uphill battle, one most professional coaches will be reluctant to take on.

The concept of “coachability” can be helpful in assessing motivation. Is there history of growth under the guidance of teachers and mentors. Coachable executives are willing to share their experience and are realistic about their strengths and weaknesses.

4. Are there alternatives to coaching?

There are many ways to help executives grow. Job rotation, special assignments, mentoring, university-based training and appropriate reading all represent options. The most overlooked alternative is attention from the individual's manager, provided that manager is capable of performing as coach.

5. Is the organization ready to support this person's efforts to grow and change?

Changing behavior is tough even when you have help from others. If key leaders within the organization are indifferent or skeptical regarding changes the executive is trying to make, this difficulty is compounded. Coaching works best when supported by cohorts within the organization.

In the appropriate circumstances executive coaching can be an effective tool for organization talent development. At **Vernon Roche and Hodgson** we have worked with executives from a variety of industries, aiding their efforts to grow and contribute within their organization. Contact us to discuss whether this developmental approach is suitable for a high-potential executive within your organization.

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