

## A Brief Overview of ....

# Professional Leadership Coaching

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Many managers, human resource professionals and training & development specialists find that contracting external coaches to work with an organization's leaders raises many questions.

1. Are coaches just consultants re-named?
2. Where did coaching come from?
3. Is it just a fad?
4. Are there basic ways for organizations to use the skills of coaching?
5. What do leadership coaches do?
6. Is coaching like therapy?
7. What kinds of topics and issues are dealt with in coaching?
8. Is there any research evidence to show that coaching is effective?
9. Why is the use of coaching in organizations growing so fast?
10. Why does coaching work?
11. What should you look for in a leadership or executive coach?
12. What are some of the best ways to use coaching to benefit an organization?

This article provides a brief overview of the modern practice of leadership coaching by answering these key questions.

### **Are leadership coaches just consultants re-named?**

**Coaching should be thought of as a new technology for enhancing both leadership development and leadership performance.** It is not simply a renaming of old methods. While well trained coaches may use consulting, advising and training as secondary tools in their kit, their primary tools are skills that make coaching distinct from other approaches.

Consultants, trainers and advisors are valuable because they know more than their clients in

specific areas of expertise. You can sit back and expect them to offer you answers. Coaches are specialists in processes that fully engage their clients in exploring, planning and executing the solutions they need. They help people clarify their goals and accelerate towards those goals with techniques that promote very time efficient on the job learning and growth. The client is drawn into using their own experience and capability to build a path to success, and learns how to keep growing in the future.



Coaching engages the client in building their own path to the success they seek.

There is, however, a significant problem for organizations in that all kinds of people now call themselves coaches. Many have little understanding of how coaches emphasize client relevance, focus, engagement, creativity, real world application, accountability and follow through to create learning and change. They simply apply their old training, consulting, counseling or advising skills under the coaching banner.

## What are the origins of contemporary coaching as it is applied in organizations?

Efforts on a number of fronts have come together in the approaches and skills that we now call coaching. All of this effort addressed one major question. **What is the best way to help intelligent and capable people achieve their goals faster?** On one hand, new perspectives in sport coaching were seen to have great potential for enhancing performance in other fields including organizational leadership. In another arena, a small network of consultants began to use the term coaching for an equally innovative approach to helping their clients reach personal and professional objectives. These two arms of coaching came together forming a distinctly new model for helping people work, live and lead more effectively. Professionals from fields like psychology and leadership development joined the effort to refine and expand coaching methods.



Even the brightest people sometimes need focus, honest feedback, the ability to see new options, and a partner to help them follow through with growth and change.

## Is it just a fad?

Definitely not. Coaching has firmly taken root in North America, Europe, Australia and Asia, and there are now thousands of coaches worldwide. The demand for coaches in organizations has been on a steady climb for 20 years, and universities are now launching dedicated Masters level programs in coaching.

## Are there basic ways for organizations to use the skills of coaching?

Here are some of the common ways coaching is currently being used in organizations.

1. Progressive employers tend to focus coaching on “making their best better”. This means providing coaches to established key leaders and leaders who are likely to be central to the organization’s success in the future.
2. Coaching is also used to help get struggling leaders back on track. This has to be approached carefully because coaching works best when the client is open to coaching, honest feedback, self-examination and learning. Some clients will respond well to coaching when there are performance or relationship problems, but others will not. Some coaches believe that success with these types of clients requires behaviour change methods that go beyond basic coaching.
3. Coaching is also used with teams to enhance overall leadership, refocus the organization or boost performance. This can involve a combination of individual coaching and group coaching, and may be linked to training and facilitated planning or team building.
4. Having leaders work with coaches after training is a great way to increase the number of trainees who actually put their training to use back on the job.
5. In addition to using external contracted coaches, some organizations now hire trained professional coaches as employees. The combination of these “internal coaches” and contracted external coaches gives the organization the flexibility to use different types of coaches in different situations.
6. And finally, many organizations now encourage leaders to learn a simplified set of coaching skills, and use a coach like approach in supervision.

## What do leadership coaches do?

Typically leadership coaches are hired to work with a leader or team for a minimum of three months, and often the relationship is six months to a year or longer. Some senior leaders now see access to a high quality coach as an ongoing part of how they deal with the isolation and stress of their position and keep themselves evolving and sharp. Usually the coach and the client meet weekly or bi-weekly, either face to face or on the phone.

**The first thing most clients notice is that the resulting relationship is unlike anything they have ever experienced before.** Most of us have never been in a situation where we have regularly and consistently worked with someone who helps us identify our goals and accelerate toward them. A coach is devoted to results, e.g. improvement in specific leadership skills, increased department output or a creative new business approach. They get to know the client and their challenges through discussion and through the use of tools like 360° degree feedback, employee interviews, other assessments, and on the job observation. Then, often with the supervisor's input, they help the client set objectives for the coaching process, and move towards the desired results.

## Is Coaching Like Therapy?

Coaching is not about fixing “broken” people. It assumes that a client is capable of moving their own learning, business and life forward.

A coaching conversation involves no delving into the past like the psychotherapy we are used to seeing on television. It is more like a thought provoking planning discussion between two people who respect and challenge each other. The focus is on the results the client seeks and how they will be achieved. Coaching does, however, draw techniques from a number of fields including some action oriented approaches to therapy.

It is also important to recognize that leaders in organizations do experience problems such as

mental health issues, addiction and marriage breakdown. In most cases, the coach has a responsibility to avoid entering into a therapeutic intervention, and instead make a referral to a suitable professional. The exception might be the coach who is also a credentialed therapist. There are trained coaches with strong backgrounds in psychology and/or therapy who now work with organizations and leaders. Also, it is not uncommon for a client to be working with a coach (e.g. on their leadership) and a therapist (e.g. on their depression) at the same time.



Coaching is a process for creating solutions. It can be applied to many types of problems, opportunities and learning.

## What kinds of topics and issues are dealt with in coaching?

Many factors affect a leader's ability to contribute to their organization, and many abilities are important to their success in current and future roles. Client's typically ask coaches to work with them on a broad range of issues including the examples listed below.

- Overall leadership style, i.e. finding an approach that fits them, their team and their challenges
- Areas of leadership skill: communication, delegation, accountability, teamwork, developing others, encouraging innovation, facilitating change, etc.

- Strategic direction and focus
- Managing up and the relationship with their supervisor
- Relationship challenges
- Workload and time management
- Life balance and stress
- Project management
- Transitions to new roles or teams
- Solving business problems

### Is there research evidence to show that leadership coaching works?

People who know research understand that it can take decades to replicate studies and do enough research to draw firm conclusions. So what do we know so far from the research on the emerging profession of coaching, and what is still inconclusive?

First, we know that when leaders have coaches they like (i.e., enjoy, respect and value), they are very positive about the coaching experience and tend to stay with their coach for 6 months to a year or longer. **This is a critical observation because no other form of leadership development consistently keeps leaders engaged in learning for long periods of time.**

Secondly, **there is now a clear pattern of positive coaching outcomes in the research.** Studies report a) improved leadership skill based on self-assessment and assessment by other employees, b) improved individual and team performance, c) significant financial return on the investment in coaching services.

What is still unclear is a lot of the important detail. Questions that have not yet had enough research attention to draw solid conclusions include the following.

- What types of clients will benefit most?
- What are the characteristics of the best and worst coaches?
- How many clients have poor coaching relationships and drop out, and why?
- What are the specific coaching approaches that lead to certain types of individual or team development, or business results?

### Why is the use of coaching in organizations growing so fast?

Another way to look at this question is to ask “Why on earth would a leader who is already time stressed pay someone to take up an hour of their calendar each week when it is entirely optional?” The answer is in the first point discussed above under coaching research. **The growth of coaching is fuelled by the quality of the coaching experience. Leaders find significant value in having regular conversations with a skilled coach.** If intelligent and time conscious leaders felt that coaching was low in value they would not continue themselves or recommend it to others. There are bad coaching experiences, and there is a need to pay attention to hiring coaches with a track record of satisfied clients. However, there are many internal company evaluations and research studies that show that leaders find coaching to be an exciting and strong learning experience.



Leaders value a coach's ability to help them find solutions and move forward quickly.

### Why does executive coaching work?

Coaches do things supervisors, subordinates, friends, consultants and trainers don't usually do. Much of this is “simple common sense” that is well grounded in the psychology of learning

and change. What makes it complicated and challenging for coaches is using these approaches with very different kinds of people in very different circumstances. Coaching works because:

- Coaches don't abandon people at the training room door. They help them integrate new ideas, plans and methods in the real, on the job, stress filled world.
- They work as true partners over months, not days, to achieve real change.
- They work with issues that are highly relevant to their clients because every issue is chosen by the client. This creates a high level of engagement.
- They help clients overcome common human tendencies like worrying but not acting, getting stuck in mental ruts, procrastinating, and getting distracted from goals in the face of other pressures.
- They present clients with full and honest feedback on unseen strengths, blind spots and weakness.
- They become the client's confidant, and a unique encouraging source of support.
- They get clients focused, and week after week they maintain the focus.
- They help clients develop creative solutions that the client believes in, and then hold clients accountable for following through.
- They use their "coaching toolkit" to overcome natural resistance to self-exploration, learning and change.



Coaching helps clients get unstuck, and see options they may not see on their own.

## What should you look for in a leadership or executive coach?

As mentioned earlier, coaching is an emerging profession, and currently any untrained, unskilled and inexperienced person can claim to be an executive coach, leadership coach or business coach. So what do you look for when contracting a coach? Here are some suggestions.

- Specialized training in coaching technique taken over months or years, i.e. a substantial commitment to learning the skills of coaching.
- Certification by a university or the International Coach Federation. The Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (WABC) may also be a significant credentialing body in the future. Note: A few very experienced and well trained coaches are not certified because certification standards evolved after they entered the field.
- Substantial personal experience as a manager or senior executive.
- Strong interpersonal skills.
- The ability to open up thinking in your organization by bringing perspectives from a number of organizational environments and industries.
- Advanced education/training or experience in related fields such as leadership, organizational behavior, human learning/change, etc.
- High ethical/professional standards.

Strong external coaches are also often very experienced people who have been drawn to coaching as a second or third career. Some leaders may find such coaches more credible, and appreciate their ability to serve as consultants and mentors when it is helpful.

It is also useful to ask if there are types of "coaches" who should be avoided. One significant concern is very directive individuals who want to tell leaders what to do, or who show up with set training materials that they want to deliver one-on-one.

Neither of these approaches is actually coaching, and both are at odds with accredited coach training standards. Leaders tend to react badly to these types of individuals because they often don't connect with the leader's real interests and needs.

### **And finally, what are some of the best ways to use coaching to benefit an organization?**

Smart organizations use coaching in the following ways.

- To support CEO's and senior leaders who can feel isolated at the top, and who have no one else to challenge them and keep them learning.
- To boost the performance of selected individuals, teams and units.
- To take established leaders out of ruts, beyond blind-spots and on to higher performance levels.
- To support the development of high potential employees and new leaders.
- To dramatically push the integration of core leadership skills and training.
- To increase retention by improving job satisfaction and showing leaders that their organization supports their career.

### **Conclusion**

In any organization, coaching has the potential to be a powerful, time efficient tool for enhancing both leadership ability and team performance. To optimize the use of this important tool, chose trained coaches with a track record of successful coaching relationships, and pair them with leaders who are open to learning and positive change. Take advantage of the fact that coaching gets leaders excited about learning and growth, and supports them as they implement new strategies that will boost their leadership skill, achievement and personal satisfaction.

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