

How to Choose an Executive Coach

By Ed Evarts

Today's fast-paced business climate demands a complement of solutions to ensure organizations have the flexibility and agility to invest in their employees in creative and focused ways. Under the umbrella of Learning & Development, one tool to help employees build clarity in their roles and objectives, create change in their environment, and realize performance and business success is coaching.

The International Coach Federation defines coaching as, "partnering with clients in thought-provoking and creative processes that inspire them to maximize their personal and professional potential." In contrast to classroom-style training, coaching provides individualized real-time conversations, surrounded by a transparent shell of confidentiality and candor.

While coaching has grown significantly over the last decade with many new coaches entering the coaching market, it is important to recognize that coaching is not a commodity. The business landscape is filled with organizations reflecting a multitude of business models, at varying stages of evolutionary growth. Within these dynamic environments are individuals whose own stage of evolutionary growth and needs vary. Supporting these businesses, teams, and individuals are executive coaches whose background, style, methodologies and capabilities are different. Finding the right coach for the a specific development opportunity is a critical investment to ensure and accelerate success.

When considering the use of an executive coach, a company should first assess its readiness to embrace this tool by asking the following questions:

- **Have we identified who we want coached?** – Consideration should be given as to whether the challenge lies with an individual or a team. Coaching a team increases the likelihood of success for all individuals involved.
- **Are the needs for a coach clear?** – Often times, executives desperate to solve a challenge or provide a development opportunity to a subordinate jump to a solution before considering all options. Before making the decision to engage a coach, consider all available solutions (e.g. a training program, a seminar) to ensure that coaching fits the situation best.
- **Does our company embrace coaching?** – A company's culture may or may not embrace coaching as a solution. Before getting to the "point of no return," ensure that organizational readiness for coaching as a solution is high.
- **What internal tools do we currently use?** – There exists a vast array of evaluative tools in the market including 360°, style, attitude, personality, and psychological type assessments. Ensure a full understanding of the tools available before reaching out to a coach who may or may not use the tools embedded in your organization.
- **Have we budgeted appropriately?** - Unless an organization has an internal coaching function, costs for coaching may be at risk of not being budgeted. While coaching is not the most expensive development option, the need for coaching can occur unexpectedly. Ensure the budget can accommodate coaching costs to help streamline the early stages of the engagement.

Once the decision to move forward with an executive coach is made, a company should identify the readiness of potential coaches by focusing on the following:

- **Chemistry** – Similar to other vendor sourcing activities, speaking with at least three candidates increases the likelihood of a good match. To maximize a successful engagement, these interviews should include the internal client. Multiple interviews can also help a company become clearer on their coaching needs by identifying what they are *not* looking for.
- **Style** – Similar to chemistry, every coach has a unique style (i.e., appreciative inquiry). Some coaches see themselves as cheerleaders while others see themselves as realists. Even though each of these is an effective style in its own right, it is important to know this information early and assess which style fits the situation best.
- **Background** – An area which best illustrates that coaching is not a commodity is in the professional background of coaches. Many coaches have unique backgrounds, which a company can leverage to maximize impact. Understanding a coach's professional background (e.g., work, education, and clients) can be a differentiator when two candidates are leading contenders.
- **Niche** – Many coaches are proficient in a particular functional area (i.e., Information Technology), level (i.e., Vice President), or industry (i.e., retail). While many of the issues or development opportunities which warrant a coach are common across many functions, levels, or industries, identifying a coach's niche can also be a meaningful differentiator.
- **Models** – Most coaches are qualified administrators of several 360°, style, attitude, personality, and psychological type assessments. Many coaches have developed their own models based on their experiences. Ensure a good understanding of the tools which a prospective coach is qualified to administer and the fit of these tools within your organization.
- **References** – Get them. References help your organization ensure that the background and style of a coach are the right mix for the coaching engagement.

As your company's coaching needs continue to grow, this process will also help your organization build a pool of coaches for the future. A coach who might not have been the right fit for today's engagement may be the perfect fit for tomorrow's engagement.

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Ed received his coach certification through the Institute for Professional Excellence in Coaching (iPEC). He is a member of the International Coach Federation (ICF), a board member for ICF's New England chapter, and a board member for the Association of Career Professionals. Ed is also a volunteer student mentor in the Wakefield Adult Mentors (WAM) program and a volunteer coach for the Coaching for Leadership and Teamwork Program (CLTP) at Babson College.

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