

How to get the most out of executive coaching

By Joyce E.A. Russell
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Executive coaching as a technique for enhancing a leader's skills has grown significantly over the past decades. No longer is it viewed as a sign of trouble if a top executive signs up for coaching. Rather, it is viewed as a perk. A recent book by some of the foremost scholars and practitioners on coaching, "Advancing Executive Coaching," edited by Gina Hernez-Broome and Lisa A. Boyce, estimates that 70 to 80 percent of companies are using coaching.

The increase in the use of coaching for leaders can be attributed to the greater demands of managing global, more diverse teams in more challenging technological, uncertain environments. Leaders today are expected to quickly deliver results while managing more workers of varied backgrounds and talents all across the world.

One challenge leaders often face is how to effectively use their executive coach. As the director of several executive coaching programs, I'm often asked: What should I do in my sessions with the coach? What should my goal be? How can I get the most out of my sessions?

Think about what you want out of a coaching relationship.

Coaches come with all sorts of training and backgrounds. As a result, they can provide varying types of services to you. Most coaches should:

- Support and challenge you.
- Help you better understand your strengths and areas for improvement.
- Talk with you (and possibly assess) your values and purpose.
- Help you create a developmental plan.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Serve as a sounding board.
- Broaden your perspectives by providing an additional viewpoint and serving as a devil's advocate.

Provide you with specific tips on how to enhance your skills.

Define expectations.

The coach should talk about confidentiality and goals for the sessions, and help you understand his or her approach (whether a strong focus on assessments, life coaching or wellness, etc). Coaches should also let you know what their role will be during the coaching sessions and describe the degree to which they will challenge and stretch you.

The coach should also share his or her expectations for you in the session. For example, the coach will want you to be honest in communications, will want you to be open to feedback from others, come prepared for the meetings, be open to new ways of doing things, and to work hard on acting on feedback you get from others.

Define the scope of the relationship.

Talk about how the sessions will be conducted -- in person, e-mail, over the phone, etc. Have the coach give you some general idea of how many sessions you will have and how often you will connect. Determine a schedule and discuss "homework" to be conducted in between sessions. Some coaches have very formal sessions with you and are not available in between. Others are more flexible and want you to contact them if important issues arise (new life changes, job changes, etc.).

What can you do to get the most out of the coaching?

For executives to get the most out of the coaching they receive:

- Periodically provide feedback to your coach about what is working or not in your sessions.
- Remain open to the feedback you get in return. You may hear things that you never heard before. Instead of immediately denying and rejecting the feedback, ask questions to better understand it. Also ask questions if you don't see the relevance of what is being said or are confused by the comment.
- Find a buddy at work or home who you can share your goals with and who can provide you with honest, timely feedback. This person may be able to provide added support as you try out new behaviors.
- Make sure your coach works with you on crafting a developmental plan. At a minimum, this should outline your key strengths, developmental areas for improvement, obstacles to changing, and action plans along with timetables. The coach should be able to give you feedback on how realistic your plan is and help you to measure progress on it.

Today, executive coaching is a valuable tool increasingly being used to enhance leadership and interpersonal skills. The key is to find the right coach for your needs and for you to be open to learning, growing and enhancing your skills. Then, a win-win can be established for the leader, the coach and the organization.

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