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## Getting More from Executive Coaching

*by Lauren Keller Johnson*

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# Getting More from Executive Coaching

by Lauren Keller Johnson

SO YOU'RE GOING TO BE WORKING WITH an executive coach—that's great! As many other high-performing managers and executives before you have found, a skilled executive coach can be invaluable in helping you surmount the obstacles that corporate life throws before you and make the most of the opportunities that cross your path.

Not too long ago, working with a coach had a whiff of stigma to it, because coaching was often a last-ditch effort to fix a problem. No more. Coaching is now used largely to expand a talented individual's repertoire of skills, and working with a coach has even become something of a status symbol—at least in the United States, where the practice of executive coaching originated—because it signals that your organization deems you worthy of substantial investment.

And executive coaching can be a substantial investment indeed. A six-month arrangement with a highly qualified, highly experienced coach can run between \$15,000 and \$30,000. What's more, coaching requires regular chunks of highly compensated executive time. So it's no surprise that executives and the organizations that employ them want to ensure that such an investment yields returns.

Complicating matters is the fact that coaching is an emerging practice whose quality can vary widely. "There aren't commonly agreed-upon coaching principles and practices," says Catherine Fitzgerald, a Bethesda, Md.-based executive coach who, in her 20 years in the field, has worked with senior leaders in organizations around the world. "The field emerged outside academic institutions, and there isn't a solid base of theory and research on which coaches can agree." Nor is there a single credentialing body to ensure that all those who call themselves executive coaches actually possess the goods to coach executives.

If you will soon be working with an executive coach or if you are charged with overseeing coaching arrangements for others in your organization, all this is sure to give you pause. What can you do to ensure that an investment in coaching pays off?

Plenty, say coaches and executives who have been

coached themselves. For coaching to be effective, the person who will be coached has to do three things: (1) identify his coaching goals, (2) follow a rigorous coach-selection process, and (3) adopt a learning mindset—approach the experience with a readiness to learn and change. In this article, experienced coaches and executives who've benefited from coaching share their advice for implementing these steps and getting the most from a coaching relationship. While their advice is directed at executives seeking

coaching themselves, it's equally relevant to HR and training professionals responsible for facilitating coaching arrangements for their colleagues.

First, though, we'll take a look at why executive coaching has become so popular, both with senior managers and with the companies that depend on their performance.

## Coaching's value proposition

Coaching has enjoyed explosive growth in recent years. For instance, membership in the International Coach Federation, an organization for both life and executive coaches, has jumped from 1,500 in 1999 to more than 10,000 today. A 2004 *Harvard Business Review* article, "The Wild West of Executive Coaching," estimated annual spending on executive coaching in the United States at about \$1 billion. What accounts for coaching's explosive growth?

Experts point to several factors. Flatter organizations, changing workplace demographics, faster business cycles, and 24/7 information flow, they say, have converged to increase the demands made on managers and executives and lessen the viability of traditional management development approaches.

Experts point to several factors. Flatter organizations, changing workplace demographics, faster business cycles, and 24/7 information flow, they say, have converged to increase the demands made on managers and executives and lessen the viability of traditional management development approaches.

The flattening of corporate structures means that "the number of relationships a leader has to manage has grown tremendously," says Fitzgerald, coeditor of *Executive Coaching: Practices & Perspectives* (Davies-Black, 2002). "In many industries, it used to be that you didn't need to worry about peer relationships; as long as you managed up and down well, you were OK. Work is more complex now; leaders need to manage a much more extensive set of rela-



tionships.” At the same time, standards for interpersonal skills have gone way up, she points out: workplaces are more diverse, and there’s a much greater focus on behavior that could expose a company to lawsuits.

Add to these increases in complexity the increased time pressure brought by faster business cycles, globalization, and intensified competition, says executive coach Susan Battley, CEO and founder of Battley Performance Consulting (Stony Brook, N.Y.), and what you’ve got is “a radically new performance model: the plug-and-play manager. Peak performers today need to scale up to new roles, responsibilities, and opportunities *fast*.”

The need for speed has not only put new demands on leaders, but it’s also diminished the viability of both in-company mentoring and off-site leadership development programs. Senior managers who are already working 70-hour weeks don’t have the bandwidth “to mentor 15 or 20 direct reports who may be scattered around the country or the world,” says Battley. And fewer managers and executives these days feel that they can be away from the office for an extended period of time to attend off-site leadership training programs, says Randall White of the Greensboro, N.C.–based Executive Development Group.

In this context, the benefits of working with an executive coach are clear, to both the individual and her company: the coaching is customized for the executive’s needs and goals, it doesn’t require time away from the office, and it easily accommodates travel—many executive coaches conduct a significant percentage of their sessions with clients over the phone.

## Maximizing coaching’s ROI

To create and sustain a coaching relationship that delivers the most value to you, take the following three steps:

### 1. Identify your coaching goals.

Before you do anything else, clarify what it is you want to accomplish through coaching:

- Are you looking to improve **specific skills**, such as delegating effectively, working more productively with your boss or your peers, or managing time?
- Is there a **particular situation**—such as a reorganization, your recent accession to the C-suite, a change in company priorities or strategy—that you want a coach to help you navigate through?
- Is your primary goal for the coach to help you **position yourself for a job** with more responsibility and a higher profile two to five years down the road?

The more precisely you can articulate your objectives, the easier it will be to identify the experience and expertise your ideal coach should possess.

### 2. Follow a disciplined coach-selection process.

The biggest question anyone looking for an executive coach has in mind is: **Is he qualified?** And for good reason. To be blunt, anyone can hang out a shingle identifying himself as an executive coach. Further complicating matters is the fact that the line between executive coaches and life coaches has blurred as coaching has risen in popularity.

Executive coaches are typically hired by an organization rather than an individual, and thus have at least two clients: the executive getting coached and the organization that she works for. Life coaches, by contrast, are hired by an individual. Both executive and life coaches take a holistic approach to helping an individual set and reach workplace goals; at different times, they might focus on relationships, self-actualization, spirituality, and life goals. But the ultimate end of executive coaching is to improve an individual’s performance in the workplace, thereby allowing her to contribute more value to the organization that employs her. Life coaching can have any number of objectives, depending on the person being coached. Traditionally, executive coaches have had academic degrees in psychology and experience working within organizations in the areas of leadership development or organizational development. Life coaches hail from a diversity of backgrounds.

The training or HR department within many companies maintains a list of executive coaches who meet set criteria

## SELECTING A COACH: ONE EXECUTIVE’S STORY

Mercy Jimenez, senior vice president of the National Business Center at Fannie Mae, has participated in several coaching arrangements funded by her organization with the aim of developing her skills and increasing the value of her on-the-job contributions. In selecting a coach, she has learned to insist on a personal affinity: “You’re going to divulge personal facts and points of view that are very private,” she says. “If you don’t feel comfortable doing that with a particular coach, you’ll hold back—and then the coach won’t be able to help you.”

Jimenez also looks for flexibility: “I don’t want a coach who follows a little rule book or makes assumptions about my needs based on their other clients. They should be able to customize their approach to my unique situation.” In addition, she values coaches who are “leading-edge thinkers” who “love their work and want to bring thinking about the coaching discipline to the next level.” Candidates who reference current research on the coaching industry during interviews catch her attention, as does the ability to challenge her “to see things in new ways and face hard realities.”

**Getting More from Executive Coaching** *(continued)*

and have delivered results in the past, thus freeing managers from having to worry about such distinctions.

For a coaching relationship to work, the coach’s qualifications are just a start. Because coaching involves sharing private thoughts and personal information, **the coach needs to be someone you will feel comfortable talking frankly with:** Would you feel more comfortable working with a female or a male coach? Would you want to work with someone older than you or around the same age? Do you want an individual from your ethnic or cultural background? How important is it that the coach have relevant contextual experience, such as direct experience with your corporate environment, knowledge gained from working with others in similar roles or lines of business, or specific industry experience?

Using your requirements and preferences as a guide, **narrow down the list to the top three candidates**—these are the ones that you’ll interview. Ask questions such as: What is your approach to coaching? What have some of your recent client engagements been about? Have any of them involved objectives and challenges similar to mine? How will we determine whether the coaching is generating value?

As you talk, assess the chemistry: Would you feel comfortable sharing highly personal information with this indi-

vidual? Do you think you can learn from him? Do you enjoy talking with him? And keep on the lookout for red flags: overuse of technical or management jargon, name-dropping, overblown claims, lack of a defined coaching method, and too much time spent talking about himself rather than asking about you and your coaching goals.

After the interviews, **rank the candidates** as superior, satisfactory, or unsatisfactory on every criterion you’ve identified as important to you. You may find it helpful to construct a simple grid, with the candidates’ names down the side and experience, education/training, match with personal preferences, etc., across the top. You should also factor in their fees, ability to work with your schedule, and location. While it is quite common for part or all of the coaching relationship to be conducted via the telephone, many executives find that they get more from coaching when they meet with their coach in person.

If you’re selecting your coach without the benefit of organizational assistance, **check the references** provided by your top choices. If you can’t decide on a final choice, use the reference-check process or another factor to tip the scales; for example, perhaps one of two equally attractive candidates can’t meet your desired start date, enabling you to rule that person out.

**3. Adopt a learning mindset.**

Even the most skilled and compatible coach can’t help you if you don’t go into the coaching arrangement willing to learn and change. Expect to be challenged to find solutions, not to be given them. Look to your coach to give you fresh perspectives and help you assess the best options for important decisions. As Mercy Jimenez, senior vice president of the National Business Center at Fannie Mae, puts it, “At the very least, I look to my coach to get me thinking about the issue at hand differently. At the most, I count on her to surface and evaluate new alternatives and help me understand the trade-offs of each option.”

One of the most valuable services a coach can provide is a wholesale reframing of a situation you thought you’d examined from every possible angle. While it’s important to define your goal before entering a coaching arrangement, embrace the possibility that your goals may change. Arlington, Va.–based executive coach Michele Woodward was once hired by an executive who told her, “I need you to help me leave my job.” But during coaching sessions, the executive discovered that her wish to leave her job was really a wish to get out of the difficulties posed by her rocky relationship with her boss and her inability to delegate. She addressed these problems through coaching and, in the end, chose to remain with the

IS EXECUTIVE COACHING RIGHT FOR YOU?		
The more questions you can answer yes to, the more likely you’re a good candidate for executive coaching.		
Ask yourself . . .	Yes	No
1. Do I have a strong desire to improve now?		
2. Do I have some idea of my coaching goals?		
3. Am I open to new ways of thinking and behaving?		
4. Can I be honest with myself about my strengths and weaknesses?		
5. Am I open to feedback, even when it’s mixed or negative?		
6. Can I be patient while awaiting the results of my coaching?		
7. Do I have time—or can I make time—in my schedule for coaching?		
8. Do I typically follow through on commitments and assignments?		

Adapted with permission from *Coached to Lead: How to Achieve Extraordinary Results with an Executive Coach*, by Susan Battley (Jossey-Bass, 2006).

## Getting More from Executive Coaching *(continued)*

company.

To help your coach help you, communicate how you learn most effectively: Is it through reading, rehearsing situations, and/or after-action reviews? “Suppose one objective for your coaching is to manage meetings more effectively,” says Fitzgerald. “Let your coach know whether you want to meet with him just before a big meeting to brainstorm possible strategies, or whether it would be more helpful to you to talk with him just after a tough meeting to discuss what happened and identify possible next steps.” When a particular approach proves ineffective, tell your coach. Your feedback is vital to creating and sustaining high-quality coaching.

Finally, expect some growing pains. Learning from coaching requires taking risks, trying out new behaviors, and admitting to mistakes, all of which can be uncomfortable. The Executive Coaching Forum’s Web site points out ([www.theexecutivecoachingforum.com](http://www.theexecutivecoachingforum.com)). Remind yourself that your coach is there to help you, not judge you, so don’t worry about performing in front of her—let her help you perform better in front of your colleagues.

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By taking an active role in defining your coaching goals, selecting a coach who can help you meet them, and opening yourself to learning from the experience, you enhance the odds that your coaching arrangement will generate value for yourself and for your firm. ♦

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