

When Bad Coaches Happen To Good People

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Corporate leaders: Beware. A lot of inexperienced "executive coaches" are touting themselves as the answer to your problems. Executive coaching is now a \$1 billion industry, according to The Economist (11-13-03), and many novice coaches are jumping on the bandwagon. However, as in many service professions, becoming good at your trade takes years of training and experience.

Good executive coaches are an excellent solution to helping busy executives to improve their leadership skills and competencies (e.g., emotional intelligence, the ability to make decisions with more discernment, influencing skills, attention on vision and a long-term view, coaching and inspiration of direct reports, and a broad view that takes in global markets and cultural differences). Executive coaches work one-on-one to make the learning personalized and relevant. Coaching is a great alternative to weeklong trainings because it doesn't take executives out of the office for an extended period, and follow-up is built into the process so that executives can learn over time with appropriate reinforcement. The return on investment to the company is also significant, especially when executive coaching is used to help retain high-potential leaders.

Inexperienced coaches, however, pull the whole industry down. Inexperience doesn't just mean a lack of years of executive coaching. Inexperienced coaches don't have a strong knowledge of human dynamics and change nor a good understanding of business functions. And inexperience also means no upfront contracting in the initial stages of the coaching, unclear goals, no tracking of progress, and no reporting of results. No wonder companies are clamoring for results and asking what they are getting for their money.

Whether you are currently engaged in leadership coaching or entertaining the possibility, here's what you should look for when contracting with an executive coach.

Coaching Process

Make sure you understand what the coaching process looks like from start to finish. The coach should be able to tell you step-by-step what he or she will do in each stage of the process and how often you will meet. This will help you know what to expect and understand who else may be involved (e.g., boss and HR partner). Typically, executive coaches meet with their corporate clients anywhere from one to four times a month--either in person or via phone--over a three- to nine-month period. (For example, Mariposa Leadership's standard engagement is weekly in-person conversations over a six month period.)

Bad coaching has no clear process. You do not know when the process starts and ends. There is no documentation of leadership goals at the beginning and leadership results at the end. The goals and results are not shared with the boss and HR partner.

Bad coaching also means a lack of check points along the way and during coaching conversations. The coach does not tie the conversation back to the goals and the reasons they are working together in the first place.

Finally, bad coaching happens when confidentiality is broken. Leaders trust their executive coaches like no other. When

confidentiality guidelines aren't established at the beginning of a coaching engagement, that can spell trouble. Violations of the guidelines by either party leads to mistrust and possibly the termination of a relationship or contract.

A good coach has a strong business practice. The coach's philosophy and approach should be to help you get results so that others notice a positive difference. The coach should have some structure around how he or she will achieve this goal so you know exactly what to expect from start to finish. You should also ask about confidentiality guidelines. It's important that your boss and HR partner know the goals and expected results and that ongoing coaching conversations remain confidential with very few exceptions (either for safety or legal reasons).

Coach's Background

A coach's background makes a huge difference in the kind of service you are going to get. Look for someone with an understanding of how businesses, organizations, or systems work and someone who has coached others in industries similar to yours. It's also important that your executive coach is not only an expert in coaching but also an expert in learning and change.

Bad coaching happens when the coach does not understand how your company works and hasn't done the necessary homework to get up to speed. As a result, when you sit down to create goals for yourself, you may find that your goals are not linked to and aligned with the larger company goals.

Bad coaching is also expressed in a lack of language alignment, meaning that the lingo the coach uses is not relevant. For example, talking about the "trauma" you inflicted on coworkers when you lost your temper in a meeting is not appropriate. The language should be appropriate to the corporate world. Coaches gain more credibility if they can speak in terms of value proposition and return on investment.

Coaching Style and Skills

Look for a coach who has a style that works with yours and pushes you to learn. Bad coaching is being too prescriptive or only asking questions. A delicate balance exists between giving executives all the answers and helping them to figure out the answers for themselves. After all, one answer does not fit all.

Bad coaching also occurs when a coach accepts an executive's take on a situation and doesn't question how the executive might have contributed to, for example, a meeting going poorly. A coach must talk about difficult issues and push the executive to take a closer look. As the coach pushes, it is also important that he or she check in with the executive to make sure the level of pushing is mildly uncomfortable to encourage the executive to learn.

Finally, bad coaching comes from a coach who cannot teach at the same pace as the executive learns. This doesn't mean that the coach stays at one pace all the time, rather he or she must demonstrate an ability to move more quickly or slow down as the situation demands. While it may be important for the executive to slow down as part of the learning process, the coach must also be able to lead by example and demonstrate the pace the executive wants to achieve.

Bottom Line

Don't let yourself be a victim of "bad coaches that happen to good people." As an informed corporate leader, make sure you ask the right questions to find the right match for you. At the very least, consider what your instincts tell you about a potential executive coach and whether you think that person can help you. You are the best judge.

If you are a human resources professional, screen candidates upfront and offer one coach--the one you think will be the best match--for consideration by the executive. Or you can partner with a firm which specializes in "brokering" of coaching services, and together, conduct the initial screening. This streamlined approach means the executive does not waste hours talking to potential coaches when those hours could be devoted to being coached.

Questions to ask a potential executive coach

1. What is your coaching philosophy and style? (For example, does the coach offer suggestions/opinions or does the coach tend to primarily ask questions until you find the answer?)
2. What is your educational background and experience in coaching and in this industry?
3. What is your coaching process and the price associated with that process? (For example, how often do you meet and for how long?)
4. How will results be tracked, and who will know about these results?
5. What are your confidentiality guidelines or policies?
6. What are three references in similar levels and types of organizations?