

Implementing Executive Coaching:

Achieving Positive, Long-term Measurable Change

During the 90s, executive coaching established a foothold in corporate America. Today, executive coaching is recognized as one of the most effective methods for developing both high-potential and executive leaders. Savvy organizations engage external coaches in an effort to dramatically increase on-the-job effectiveness of selected leaders. Most of these coaching engagements are behavioral in nature and aim to create a positive impact in the leadership attributes of individual leaders.

How does an organization go about implementing an executive coaching process? What are the steps in the process? What are the key determinants for success? What are the pitfalls to be avoided? This article will address these questions based on the collective experiences of Alliance for Strategic Leadership (A4SL) coaches.

Phases in the Executive Coaching Process

An executive coaching process is comprised of five phases:

1. Contracting
2. Assessment
3. Action Planning
4. On-going Coaching
5. Outcome Measurement

Each phase is discussed below in further detail.

◆ Contracting

Contracting represents the foundation upon which a successful coaching partnership is formed. It is critical to ensure clarity and agreement regarding the expectations of the coach and the executive *before* the engagement begins. The investment of time and energy in the contracting phase yields continuing dividends throughout the entire coaching process.

Two separate dimensions should be addressed in the contracting phase:

- Agreements regarding the coach's relationship/interaction with the sponsoring organization
- Agreements regarding the on-going interaction between the coach and executive

At a minimum, contracting addresses the mutual responsibilities of all parties in the coaching process, including:

- Purpose of coaching engagement and desired outcomes
- Definition of successful outcomes, as well as how success will be measured and determined
- Treatment of confidential information
- Types of feedback assessment to be used
- Timeframes, costs, and payment arrangements
- Role of key stakeholders within the coaching process

Matching Coaches with Executives

Of paramount importance is the “chemistry” or “fit” between the coach and executive. It is this chemistry that feeds and nurtures the trusting relationship to be developed over time. Without the right chemistry, the coaching partnership can’t succeed. Participants are encouraged to interview several prospective coaches prior to the engagement. It is the executive who ultimately selects the coach. Matching an executive to a coach can be based on several additional criteria:

- Geography: Many organizations prefer to contract for individual coaching assignments with locally available coaches.
- Experience of the participant: Many coaches specialize in working with senior executives, mid-level managers, and/or first-line supervisors.
- Experience/background of the coach: Executives often benefit from coaches with related real-world business experience, extensive coaching expertise, and/or advanced educational training.
- The Coach’s style: On occasion, an executive prefers a coach with a particular interpersonal/communication style (such as “direct,” “collaborative,” “thorough,” “quick,” etc.).

◆ **Assessment**

During the assessment phase, the executive’s leadership strengths and development opportunities are brought to light. Generally, feedback is gathered from the leader’s key stakeholders (direct reports, peers, customers, boss, etc.).

Multi-rater 360° feedback is most commonly used for assessment. Customized 360° feedback inventories that reflect the organization’s mission and values are often preferred. This type of feedback is excellent for providing insight, self-awareness, and identification of strengths and developmental needs. The coach may also conduct personal interviews with raters to sharpen the focus

of development coaching. Executives benefit from real-time feedback provided by key stakeholders regarding behaviors that are critical to leadership success.

Data collection for the 360° feedback process takes place online. Participants identify key stakeholders to provide meaningful feedback. Emails are sent to these raters asking them to participate in the process. Participants also complete a self-assessment questionnaire. These forms typically take 10-30 minutes to complete. Rater input is then compiled into a feedback report.

Coaches may recommend additional assessment tools, including personality inventories, leadership skills assessments, cognitive tests, and ability batteries. These supplemental assessment tools can be used when deemed appropriate by the executive and the coach.

◆ Action Planning

Executives are encouraged to identify high-impact opportunities for development based on their feedback. Often a single theme will emerge from the feedback data. Leaders select one or two areas for development. Attempting to change too many things at once can dilute the leader's focus. Also, effectively changing one behavior may have a "scatter effect," positively affecting other aspects of the executive's leadership.

The area of development chosen should be consistent with the executive's internal motivation. The executive needs to answer the question, "If I get better at this behavior, how will it benefit me, my people, or my organization?" *The executive needs to believe in the benefits of change if the developmental goal is to be more than another unfulfilled obligation.*

The coach and the executive agree on a written action plan that will serve as the "road map" for the coaching partnership. It should be challenging, yet grounded in the realities of the workplace. The executive and coach agree on specific and simple action steps to facilitate the desired changes. "Simple" does not mean "easy," but understandable and doable. For example, if the executive wants to become a better listener, action steps might include: making effective eye contact; not interrupting others; paraphrasing before responding; holding incoming calls during personal conferences; and so on.

The action plan must have built-in accountability. Coaches should provide concrete ways of measuring success. Mini-surveys (described below) are administered at appropriate intervals to give the executive real-time feedback on perceived progress. These measures provide a sense of positive growth and direction for continued improvement.

Effective action plans focus on business results that positively impact the executive, the team, and the organization. The plan for change is specific, simple, and measurable. The executive is able to focus on the plan and to

maintain confidence that the plan is achievable. Executives are accountable for their efforts and see results in follow-up surveys. Once the action plan is created, the on-going coaching can begin.

◆ **On-going Coaching**

Mutual trust and respect are critical to the relationship between coach and executive. The coach must challenge the executive where appropriate and also provide positive support and feedback regarding observed improvements. Similarly, the executive must provide the coach with honest, direct feedback about how the process is working and suggest when changes are necessary.

What specifically takes place during the on-going coaching phase? Generally, the coach meets with the executive through a variety of ways on an agreed upon time basis. Certain situations may mandate more or less frequent sessions. A typical meeting agenda addresses some or all of the following content:

- Explore the current business situation and understand what has changed since the prior session
- Review progress against the action plan
- Ensure the executive is following-up regularly with key stakeholders
- Identify barriers or resistance to change
- Develop tools and identify resources to support the change goals and associated action plan
- Review situations that have occurred in which the executive succeeded or failed in demonstrating the new behavior(s)
- Utilize failures as valid learning opportunities and probe what additional methods the executive might employ in the future
- Review follow-up measures and timetable
- Plan next meeting dates and agendas

The coach needs to understand the executive's leadership issues and should be aware of the surrounding business environment. The behavior change goals established should enable the executive to be more effective within the context of these business issues.

Coaches share related case studies, research materials, and other readings as well as their own insights from other organizations to enhance the coaching process. In addition, coaches may also shadow the executive, interview key stakeholders, and research other support options relating to the developmental goals.

◆ **Outcome Measurement**

Coached executives identify behavior change goals, follow through with their action plans, and then measure the success of these efforts. Change is mea-

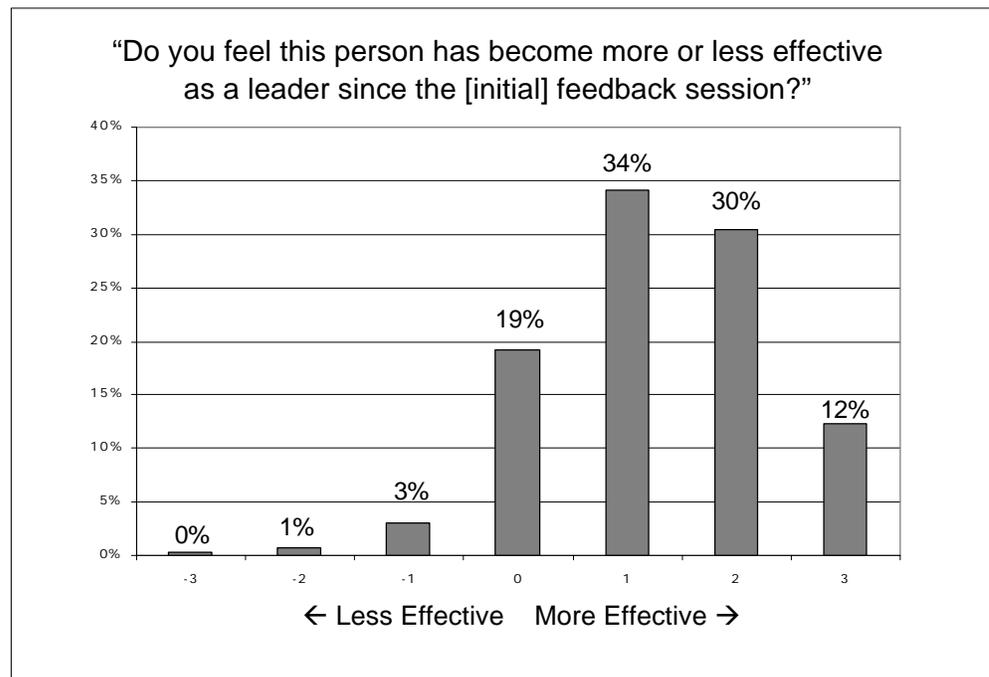
sured through either a written “mini-survey” or through stakeholder interviews conducted by the coach. “Mini-surveys” are generally short, two-to four-item questionnaires that are completed by all of the executive’s key stakeholders. The process is often scored online.

The questionnaire typically includes an item measuring the improvement in overall leadership effectiveness. It also inquires whether the executive followed up with respondents. The remaining mini-survey items are directly tailored to the executive’s individual areas for development.

Many coaching programs include two follow-up mini-surveys: one at the mid-point and one at the end of the coaching engagement. Most executives look forward to these surveys as a “mid-term” and “final exam.” Mini-survey results reveal how others perceive the executive’s change and follow-up efforts. Mid-point mini-surveys notify the executive and coach as to what adjustments, if any, need to be made moving forward.

Aggregate mini-survey results can provide a useful executive profile for an organization. The following graphic illustrates mini-survey results from several organizations. Key stakeholders were asked to rate executives’ perceived improvement in overall leadership effectiveness over time.

In the example below of 3,838 respondents, 42 percent of the respondents felt executives improved at a “+2” or “+3” level. An impressive 76 percent were seen as improving at a “+1”, “+2” or “+3” level. Only 4 percent of respondents cited declining effectiveness.



Note: N=3,838 respondents

Lessons Learned

Coaching for behavioral change is *not* a panacea or silver bullet to “cure” an executive, nor is it a process through which a leader undergoes a personality makeover or a self-transformation. Some individuals who enter into a coaching partnership fail because they do not demonstrate a sufficient number of core leadership competencies. Candidates should be screened out of a coaching program if an organization has already determined the leader will not be successful. *Executive coaching does not take the place of organizational discipline, redeployment, or referrals to Employee Assistance Programs.*

The following are some lessons learned about what is essential for a successful coaching engagement:

Clarity of Focus

Early in the coaching process, specific parameters for behavioral change need to be identified and accepted. Multiple sources of feedback from key stakeholders are used to accurately identify leadership strengths and developmental opportunities. Coaches gather feedback through various methodologies, including online surveys, paper-and-pencil surveys, interviews, and direct observations.

Successful executives tend to want to “fix” everything. History teaches that the KIS approach (keep it simple) is the more effective technique. In other words, executives are best served by isolating and focusing on one or two development target(s) per each six- to nine-month period. Once the individual has achieved the goal(s), moving on to the next development target is appropriate. This approach positions the executive to deliver on leadership development commitments.

Importance of Contracting

In order for the coaching process to be successful, an understanding concerning boundaries and parameters must be reached among the executive, the supervisor, and the coach *before* the coaching partnership begins. A written agreement outlining the process and responsibilities eliminates a host of potential problems that may otherwise occur as the process progresses.

Commitment of Executive

For the process to be effective, the executive must be willing to make a sincere effort to change. This includes acceptance of the need to change the behaviors identified in the assessment phase and a commitment to follow through on the action plan. Reluctant acceptance slows leadership development and denial sabotages the process.

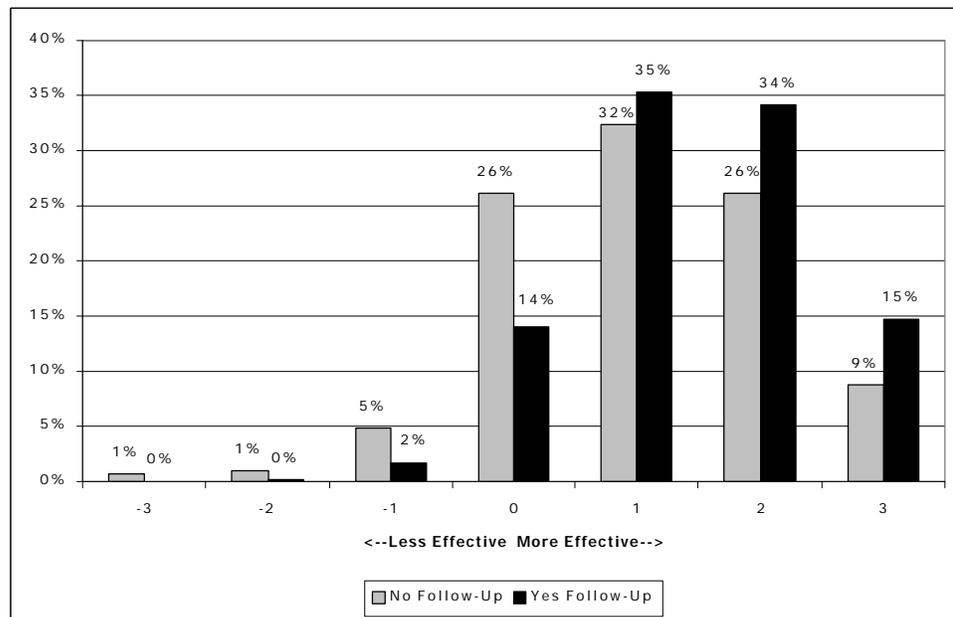
Commitment of the Supervisor

The support and involvement of the executive’s supervisor is vital to the successful outcome of the coaching process. The coach should conduct an early discussion with the supervisor concerning the coaching process and the desired outcomes. Reinforcement by the supervisor for desired change can accelerate the executive’s progress.

Involving Key Stakeholders

At the outset, the executive needs to invite the stakeholders to participate in the development process by asking for candid feedback. Stakeholders should anticipate follow-up from the executive throughout the process.

Our research has repeatedly shown that those leaders who follow up regularly with their key stakeholders regarding development efforts improve significantly as compared to those who do not. The following table aggregates overall leadership effectiveness scores for 3,655 respondents from several organizations.



Note: N=3,655 respondents

Forty-nine percent of leaders who followed up were seen as improving at a +2 and +3 level, while only thirty-five percent of leaders who did not follow up were seen as improving to that same level. Only sixteen percent of leaders who followed up were seen as unchanged or slightly less effective, as compared to thirty-three percent of leaders, with no follow up, seen as unchanged or less effective. (Goldsmith & Underhill, 2000).

Conclusion

Executive coaching is a powerful tool for building on an individual's strengths and for addressing development opportunities. Coached executives identify high-impact development goals and commit time and energy to making significant behavioral changes. Stakeholders provide feedback at the front end of the process to help in the identification of development goals and again later in the process to assess the executive's progress. Coaches guide the process of behavioral change, elevating successful executives to even higher levels of leadership excellence.



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