

## EXECUTIVE COACHING: IT WORKS!

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Outcomes of this empirical study demonstrated that executive coaching is an effective method of leadership development. One hundred fourteen executives and 42 coaches were surveyed using instruments designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Results indicated that executive change occurred in 5 areas: people management, relationships with managers, goal setting and prioritization, engagement and productivity, and dialogue and communication. This study also highlights the importance of coach selection, executive commitment to behavioral change, and the role of good program and environmental support. The success of this coaching program also suggests that investment in well-designed and implemented programs can contribute to leadership development and the retention of talent.

*Keywords:* executive coaching, leadership development, executive change, coaching program

The phenomenon of executive coaching has mushroomed in recent years. The need for competent managers and the reported success of coaching have prompted corporations to adopt this strategy to improve executive performance. Coaching may be popular because it provides needed expertise, an objective viewpoint, and is integrated into the executive's routine (Lary, 1997).

A review of coaching literature indicates that there is a paucity of empirical data to support the anecdotal evidence that coaching produces positive outcomes (Kilburg, 2004). This study reports on a coaching project undertaken by a global pharmaceutical company to develop executives for an expanding scope of responsibilities. The findings add to the empirical evidence on methodology, process, outcomes, and strategies of coaching. In

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addition, the insights may be useful for the design and development of more effective coaching programs for better return on investment.

## A Review of the Literature

### *What Is Coaching?*

Executive coaching is a short-term interactive process between a coach and a manager to improve leadership effectiveness by enhancing self-awareness and the practice of new behaviors. The coaching process facilitates the acquisition of new skills, perspectives, tools and knowledge through support, encouragement, and feedback in the organizational context.

Executive coaching has become a method of choice for leadership development because of its unique position in helping modify perspectives and behavior without sacrificing competence and self-esteem (Strickland, 1997). A new perspective develops by examining the underlying patterns of perception and behavior and utilizing that insight for change (Pilette & Wingard, 1997). The most important factors in the success of a coaching relationship are clear, honest communication and good action ideas (Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999).

Coaching is often used to help an executive transition from the role of a project manager to people manager (Hayes, 1997). Transition challenges include adjusting personal style and approaches to people and learning the rules and expectations of the new role. Coaching may also focus on a specific content area to provide the leader with specific knowledge and skills. Coaching may also be recommended for problematic attitudes and behaviors. Executives may need coaching to understand their new role with its implicit style, rules, and expectations.

The coaching environment offers the executive the opportunity to reflect and consider issues that may be barriers to performance. Thus, coaching may enhance personal style, expand future options, and increase organizational impact. The acquisition of skills, abilities, and perspectives enable executives to reach goals that were previously difficult to attain (Hall et al., 1999).

Diedrich (1996) reiterated the importance of feedback, coaching as an ongoing activity, and interactive learning to increase executive's awareness of the impact of behavior on performance. Executive change involves identifying the patterns of experience and behavior that affect goal attainment, creating a fresh perspective toward these patterns by reframing, and rehearsing new behaviors (Pilette & Wingard, 1997). Encouraging clients (Beckhard, 1997) and using a variety of techniques and instruments (Sperry, 1993) contribute to the success of coaching. Important environmental factors are confidentiality, executive accountability for follow through, senior leadership modeling, and integration with HR systems (Kiel, Rimmer, Williams, & Doyle, 1996; Thach & Heinselman, 1999).

### *Who Are Successful Coaches?*

The literature emphasizes the pivotal role of a good coach. Effective coaches understand contemporary organizational issues, human motivation, and the impact of emotions and interpersonal style on executive leadership. Coaches also need to understand leadership and management issues from a multisystems viewpoint and the political and economic realities within the organization and its competitive environment. They require self-awareness and knowledge to maintain appropriate confidentiality and the boundaries of

appropriate roles and behavior between coach, executive, and collaterals (Hayes, 1997; Kiel et al., 1996; Levinson, 1996).

One key role that coaches play is facilitator of professional development (Benton, 1999; Sperry, 1993). In this role, coaches assist executives to organize their thinking, become more objective, and develop greater capacity to manage change. Executives recognize behaviors that hinder effectiveness in managing, and explore and develop new problem-solving options. Coaches provide insights into interpersonal problems and assist executives to learn new skills through modeling.

A clear, distinguishing characteristic of successful coaches is their passion in helping others grow and perform. They inspire and motivate others with disciplined intensity (Peterson, 1996). They tend to be comfortable around top management, have the ability to deal with paradoxes, and demonstrate interpersonal sensitivity (Katz & Miller, 1996). Coaches provide insights, political savvy, the ability to detect hidden agendas, and to have a broad systems view of the organization and its leadership. Flexibility and creativity play a significant role in achieving the desired outcomes (Brotman, Liberi, & Wasylyshyn, 1998; Kiel et al., 1996).

Outstanding coaches are described as approachable, compassionate, and relate well with others. They often ask clarifying questions in the process of building rapport, and they are excellent listeners who reflect accurately what is said. They are known for their high level of integrity, personal honesty, and clear boundaries of professional conduct (Brotman et al., 1998).

## Study Method

### *The Coaching Program*

Beginning in July 2002, a large multinational corporation initiated an executive coaching program to support their executives who were experiencing transition challenges following a significant acquisition. Coaching was selected as the method of leadership development to prepare executives for changes in their leadership roles and for an increased scope of responsibility. Coaches endeavored to:

- Increase people effectiveness by building on strengths and working through blind spots,
- Facilitate strong ties between the executive and his manager, direct reports, collaterals, and
- Develop skills and experience for executives to coach others.

Forty-two experienced coaches were selected to coach 114 executives in 12 sessions over a 6-month period. The coaching process began with establishing rapport and seeking to understand the executive in her/his organizational context. The coaches learned about company business and work culture through conversations with the executives and by reviewing multiple sources of information. They helped executives to reframe perspectives, understand the impact of their behavior on others, and encouraged the practice of new behaviors. At the conclusion of the process, coaches suggested potential strategies to ensure continuing progress.

The coaching sessions were scheduled conveniently and structured to meet the executive's needs. Executives liked the flexibility of communicating face-to-face, by phone, or email. Their managers, peers, HR, and program administrators provided the needed support and the autonomy for the coach and the executive to work successfully.

### *Research Methodology*

Following the completion of coaching in January 2003, the coaches and coachees were surveyed to measure the program's effectiveness. Coaches were also surveyed for their opinions to determine best practices, that is, the tools, techniques, methods, and resources utilized in achieving successful outcomes.

Two survey instruments were developed after a thorough review of the existing literature. Face and content validity were established by a panel of experts who provided feedback both on the content and the design of the questionnaires. The instrument measuring the perceptions of coachees is comprised of 62 close-ended and 3 open-ended questions. The instrument capturing the coaches' experience used 34 close-ended and 22 open-ended questions. The quantitative questions were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Both surveys were administered online using a web-enabled tool, Inquisite. The executives' response rate was 91%, and the coaches' rate was 69%.

The quantitative sections of both surveys were analyzed for strengths and areas needing improvement. The coachee survey instrument was examined to identify whether the items sorted themselves into clusters that suggest common underlying constructs (Principle Component Analysis). The instrument also showed high reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .95$ ; see Tables 1 & 2; Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998).

The qualitative responses were content analyzed to identify common themes. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings were analyzed for convergence and consistency. The qualitative findings were used to understand and explain the response patterns of quantitative data.

## Findings

The following section describes the evidence of executive change, the five areas where change occurred, and the selection of effective coaches.

### *Evidence of Executive Change*

Most executives (81%) agreed that the coaching outcomes were consistent with expectations. They reported that coaching increased their confidence (72%), maximized their contribution to the company (78%), and was beneficial to business (86%). Executives indicated that coaching adds value, dismissing the popular misconceptions of coaching as a "fad" (81%), and "just common sense" (88%). They believed that their managers saw coaching in a positive light and that the time spent on coaching was a good return on investment (73%).

The narrative themes contained in the coaches' data highlight improved communication skills and increased executive effectiveness in their leadership role. Through direct observation and personal experience, coaches noted changes in the patterns of executive's interactions with them. Coaches also observed behavioral and personal changes that were incorporated into the executive's leadership style. Illustrative comments include,

The coachee has made significant progress in becoming a more active manager.

The coachee became a more open communicator, better able to listen and ask probing questions to ascertain others' concerns, rather than to arbitrarily make unilateral decisions.

A strong congruence of perceptions that the coaching goals were met exists among coaches and executives. Executives stated,

Table 1  
*Percentages of Variance Explained*

Component	Initial eigenvalues		Extraction sums of squared loadings		Rotation sums of squared loadings	
	Total	% of variance	Total	% of variance	Total	% of variance
Engagement and productivity	10.142	40.568	10.142	40.568	4.622	18.487
People management	3.037	12.147	3.037	12.147	3.934	15.738
Dialogue and communication	1.372	5.490	1.372	5.490	3.898	15.591
Goal-setting and prioritization	1.253	5.011	1.253	5.011	2.276	9.102
Relationships with managers	1.042	4.170	1.042	4.170	2.117	8.468
		40.568		40.568		18.487
		52.714		52.714		34.224
		58.204		58.204		49.815
		63.215		63.215		58.917
		67.385		67.385		67.385

I feel that I am a more capable leader and better able to coach others.

Coaching enhanced work performance in developing and leading a high performance team . . . and to help the team prioritize business opportunities, and to identify, construct and implement high impact projects.

The coaches and executives concurred that the goals of coaching were met. The coaches also confirmed with the executive's manager and colleagues that executive change had, in fact, occurred. In summary, the consistency of the findings across sources and methods (quantitative, narrative, observation, and review of daily plans and notes) indicated that coaching had successfully achieved executive change.

### *Five Areas of Executive Change*

The principal component analysis of the executive survey highlighted five areas of change: effective people management, better relationships with managers, improved goal setting and prioritization, increased engagement and productivity, and more effective dialogue and communication (see Tables 1 & 2). These are discussed in light of the qualitative findings.

*Effective people management.* Executives reported that coaching has refined their people skills by increasing their insight into how colleagues' perceive their actions and decisions (98%). Executives described this improvement as,

Coaching clarified my role as team leader, allowed me to understand my impact on direct reports.

I am more able to understand how my actions are perceived, able to better understand my reaction to various personality types, able to coach my direct reports more effectively.

The overwhelming majority of the executives reported better self-awareness and understanding of personal strengths (99%), better results managing direct reports (91%), and internal customers (94%). Verbatim comments from executives and coaches point to these outcomes:

I became more aware of my actions and learned skills to help control situations. I became more aware of the cost of my actions.

My coach has helped me improve my customer relationships by keeping my customers aware of conflicting priorities and when to expect deliverables.

Coachee has worked to project confidence, monitor "mood" and work actively to develop her direct reports while enhancing visibility at a more strategic level. She has received extensive positive feedback from direct reports and manager on perceived improvements.

These and other similar comments reflect executives' increased confidence in their leadership ability. They were better able to utilize their strengths and manage their weaknesses. They realized the inadvertent impact of their leadership styles and learned how to accommodate the work styles of others. Executives improved their skills in influencing and negotiating, conflict management and resolution, and giving and receiving feedback.

Coaches also confirmed that executives viewed themselves as better leaders who accomplished their goals more effectively. Awareness of problematic interpersonal be-

Table 2  
*Rotated Component Matrix*

Questions	Component				
	Engagement and productivity	People management	Dialogue and communication	Goal-setting and prioritization	Relationships with managers
Coaching increased trust in the company	.736				
Coaching increased work satisfaction	.752				
Coaching maximized contribution to the company	.758				
Coaching makes the company a better place to work	.551				
Coaching increased effectiveness		.799			
Coaching produced better results with customers		.675			
Coaching increased effectiveness in managing direct reports		.753			
Coaching improved the working relationship with manager					.607
Coaching increased partnership and open dialogue with boss					.589
Coaching is supported by manager					.706
Coaching increased self-awareness and understanding of strengths		.625			
Coaching provided insight into how others experience my actions and decisions		.628			
Coaching enhanced ability to balance and prioritize work				.439	
Coaching provided insight into the business drivers of my decisions and their impact on others				.485	
Coaching helped me achieve better business results	.639				
Coaching helped define performance goals more clearly				.445	
Coaching inspired me to go beyond what is expected	.652				
Coaching helped me set/define business objectives with direct reports				.823	

Table 2 (continued)

Questions	Component				
	Engagement and productivity	People management	Dialogue and communication	Goal-setting and prioritization	Relationships with managers
Manager gives me more positive feedback			.540		
Manager shows more confidence in my ability			.671		
Manager engages me more open, honest conversation			.753		
Manager solicits feedback and input on behavior/ actions			.763		
Manager listens to feedback and incorporates into actions			.833		
Manager shares more information			.635		
Manager spends time coaching me					.557

*Note.* Extraction method used principal component analysis. Rotation method used varimax with Kaiser normalization.

aviors prompted executives to realize the need for change and to adopt new collaborative behaviors. There is some indication that they learned to self-monitor their emotions and moods, were more open to feedback without personalizing, and took responsibility for their limitations.

Furthermore, in response to their own coaching experience, some executives initiated one-on-one meetings with their direct reports to facilitate their professional development. The above changes, together with improved communication skills and relationships, increased their effectiveness as leaders in managing people.

*Better relationships with managers.* Another area of change identified in the analysis is the improved quality of the relationship with managers. Seventy nine percent of executives agreed that they have established a more productive relationship with better communication and feedback. Executives articulated these benefits of coaching: “More awareness of how my behaviors impact the relationship with my manager,” “better understanding of how to work with my manager,” “improved clarity of expectations,” “provided an outline for addressing issues,” and “the mechanism for targeted conversation with my manager.” They also perceived their managers as more supportive of their developmental needs and career concerns.

Coaches agree that relationships have improved,

Was tenuous. After coaching the relationship has been described by both people as good, open, honest with trust established through coaching, and the structure for building on it as they move forward.

The coachee has a very close and solid working relationship with his boss. They are able to speak openly with each other and give each other feedback. They are on the same page in terms of developmental needs for the coachee. The boss is very interested in “growing” the coachee.

*Improved goal-setting and prioritization.* Executives reported that coaching assisted them in balancing and prioritizing their work. They were better able to define performance goals (88%) and business objectives with direct reports (80%). Coaching provided insight into the business drivers of decisions and their impact on others (76%).

Identifying and prioritizing the big issues, and concentrating less on issues that I either had no control over, or were of less importance to my job as a manager.

I take time now to plan more thoroughly and analyze business and professional priorities before acting.

Kept me very focused, thus, efficient and effective in delivering on my goals.

Executives learned to focus their goals and priorities on key issues and outcomes. This enhanced teamwork, participation, and commitment. Better planning and goal-setting skills also contributed to increased confidence and more effective management. Coaches confirmed these changes. They noted that executives now make clearer requests of direct reports, set better expectations, and set limits with colleagues more effectively. Overall, they demonstrated an increase in strategic leadership.

*Increased engagement and productivity.* Executives perceived coaching as contributing to their understanding of personal strengths and the company culture. Consequently, they were better able to adapt to the work environment and were more productive (78%) and satisfied (75%). Executives noted that coaching increased their personal engagement in their work. They cited these outcomes as a good return on investment.

The improvements were tangible and sustained. I am certainly an even more motivated employee due to these efforts; I have more to give back.

This program further solidified my desire and passion to be the best manager I can be, continue to develop people, and make the company a better organization.

Coaching assisted with the effective handling of a poor-performing unit, which has since turned around.

*More effective dialogue and communication.* Narrative comments consistently point to better interaction and communication between executives and managers. Sixty-eight percent of executives reported an increased partnership and open dialogue with them.

I established more communication and a much better relationship with my direct supervisor.

Overall, the experience was excellent. It helped to increase communications between my boss and me.

Coaches experienced that the executives listened without prejudgment and shared their ideas and information more freely. Improved communication with managers and direct reports is consistent with this finding. Executives provided better feedback, fact-focused dialogue and improved delivery of difficult performance reviews to their direct reports. Executives communicated work tasks and expectations better, and managed difficult situations more effectively. They also learned how to be an unbiased sounding board for others through dialogue and communicate effectively with peers.

We focused on specific interactions with his team and boss. He was able to test out new ways of managing and leading.

He took my ideas to his next meeting and successfully interacted with senior management.

Although executives and coaches experienced more effective overall communication, only about 50% of executives reported improvements in how the managers communicated and provided balanced feedback to them. This disparity suggests the need for further exploration of the potential differential effects of coaching on executives and their managers.

### *Selection of Effective Coaches*

The success of this coaching engagement in creating executive change reflects competent, experienced, and professional coaches. Most executives (94%) were pleased with their coaches, and their assistance in attaining their goals. The coaches were highly knowledgeable about the company culture and business (86%). Executives indicated a higher level of comfort in discussing critical issues because their coaches were not affiliated with the company.

My coach was a great professional, very smart, and quick in seizing any situation, intuitive, and it was wonderful listening to his analyses.

Eighty percent of the coaches were selected from two large HR consulting firms. Most had 10 or more years coaching experience, but all had at least 4 years experience. One quarter had coached at this company for more than 3 years. The coaches' knowledge of the assessment tools (MBTI, FIRO-B, Denison Leadership Development Survey, Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, and the Human Synergetics Life Styles Inventory) is evidence of their expertise in generating insights for behavioral change.

The coaches exhibited high professional standards. In their dealings with the executives and others, they maintained confidentiality and professional boundaries, avoided multiple relationships and potential conflicts of interest. The strategies they utilized to manage these quandaries manifest their solid understanding and application of professional ethics.

## Discussion

Organizations have utilized several methods to train their leaders. A unique feature of coaching, unlike other methods of executive development, such as conferences and training sessions, is that behavioral practice is its central component. The coaching plan encourages the executive to develop new approaches and behaviors, practice them, reevaluate their impact and try a revised approach for improved effectiveness. A major strength of coaching is that it respects the style and the authority of the executive and provides both positive and negative feedback on the impact of the executive's behavior. Although other approaches may suggest ideas for personal change, coaching puts these ideas into action. Coaching may be the preferred method except when complex behavioral change is required.

Executive commitment to behavioral change is necessary for a successful coaching process. The executive's willingness, motivation, and his view of the problem determine the extent of change possible. Therefore, the executives who will benefit most from the

coaching experience are those who are ready to be coached and do what is needed to accomplish the goals.

The findings on effective people management show the overwhelming impact that coaching has on executive self-awareness and, hence, commitment. Insight regarding their verbal impact on others, an understanding of how they respond to different personality types and the costs of their actions are important aspects in becoming more effective managers. Combining the insights of self-awareness with new behavioral skills, executives demonstrated an increased confidence in their leadership ability. Self-confidence appears to be a critical factor for the adoption of new collaborative behaviors, openness to feedback, and acceptance of personal limitations. The improved capacity to relate to direct reports, internal customers and managers in a focused way mobilizes others to improve productivity and effectively achieve corporate goals.

Of paramount concern to business is the productivity of executives. Often business outcomes are closely tied with an executive's ability to prioritize efficiently and set clear objectives that align with corporate goals and those of direct reports. In the increasing complexity of today's business with its global environment, the ability to prioritize and set goals is significantly more difficult. When executives have global responsibilities, coaching that focuses on goal-setting and prioritization would provide a good ROI.

Coaching significantly improved the relationship between the executives and their managers. When coaching is the preferred method of leadership development, it provides a mechanism for targeted conversation about goals and a more objective context for clarifying expectations. Furthermore, improved communication led executives to perceive their managers as becoming more supportive of their career development. The experience of speaking openly and giving mutual feedback provided an impetus to encourage personal development in the future.

Some executives indicated a need for greater participation of their managers in the coaching process. Only about half the executives reported that their managers used the coaching experience to discuss the benefits of coaching with them. For a working partnership that can maximize the benefits of coaching, managers need to be actively involved throughout the coaching engagement. Program administrators may need to develop mechanisms to elicit and sustain the participation of managers in the program. Adding manager involvement to executive commitment to change suggests a better return on investment.

For organizations to perform effectively and efficiently, retention of talented and trained managers is critical. This study demonstrated that coaching has increased executive engagement. Research (Huselid, 1995) has provided evidence that the more engaged a manager is, the more productive he or she is. Therefore, coaching leads to increased productivity. Coaching is a viable method of leadership development, especially for companies that are challenged in retaining high-potential employees.

Coaching has positive effects not only on the executive but also on others in the work environment: direct reports, managers, colleagues and customers. One indirect effect of coaching is that executives coach their subordinates to support their career development. Coaching direct reports improves these relationships and is a good long-term investment that may save the organization the costs associated with external coaching in the future. Companies that adopt this approach generate a continuing line of prepared leaders.

Sustaining executive progress is essential for business. Manager engagement and support are the usual means to integrate coaching gains into the corporate environment.

Maximizing the long-term benefits also requires that a “culture of mentoring” be established and supported by the policies, procedures, and structure of the organization.

In addition to business acumen, the strategies and techniques employed in this study assume that coaches also possess a solid background and understanding of the psychological sciences. Part of the success of this coaching program was the coaches’ professionalism and ethical standards. This suggests the need to develop professional standards and a code of ethics to guide other practitioners in the field. This would also improve the quality of coaching practice.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the coaching engagement has achieved its goals and effected positive executive change in five areas: people management, relationship with managers, goal setting and prioritization, engagement and productivity, and dialogue and communication. Executives increased their people effectiveness by building on strengths and working through their blind spots, strengthened their relationships with their manager, direct reports, and others, and developed the skills and experience to coach others. Executive coaching assisted in attaining a higher level of executive performance.

A well-designed coaching program with external coaches can help executives with transitions as demonstrated in this study. Factors in the success of this executive coaching engagement included: the selection of good coaches, good environmental program support, executive commitment, and the participation of managers. Executives gained new perspectives and practiced new behavioral approaches that led to executive change and an increase in strategic leadership.

Coaching alone may not be sufficient to produce effective people skills, communication skills, and the ability to set goals. Supplemental intervention may be needed, especially in the area of difficult communication. One explanation may be that the individual personality factors or the fit with the manager is more complex than coaching can address. Another explanation may be that the organizational culture does not adequately support and reward these changes.

The findings of this study show that coaching can have positive outcomes for the individual and the organization. The findings also corroborate practitioners’ experience that coaching really works. However, the data used in this study is limited to the reports of coaches and coachees. Future research could include the perspectives of managers, peers, direct reports, and customers. Adding their perspectives may produce new insights and understanding that leads to better program implementation and outcomes.

The results highlighted in this study refer to short-term benefits. To understand the sustainability of these benefits, more research is needed to monitor the long-term progress made by coachees. Long-term indications of executive effectiveness will assure that coaching dollars are well spent.

With the rising popularity of coaching as a method of leadership development, there is an increased need for clear practice guidelines and the development and acceptance of professional standards. For increased coaching effectiveness, more empirical studies on the factors influencing coaching outcome are needed. Companies can benefit greatly by including empirical outcome evaluations in planning their coaching initiatives. Doing so will provide specific information that will shape and improve the professional practice of executive coaching in the future.

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