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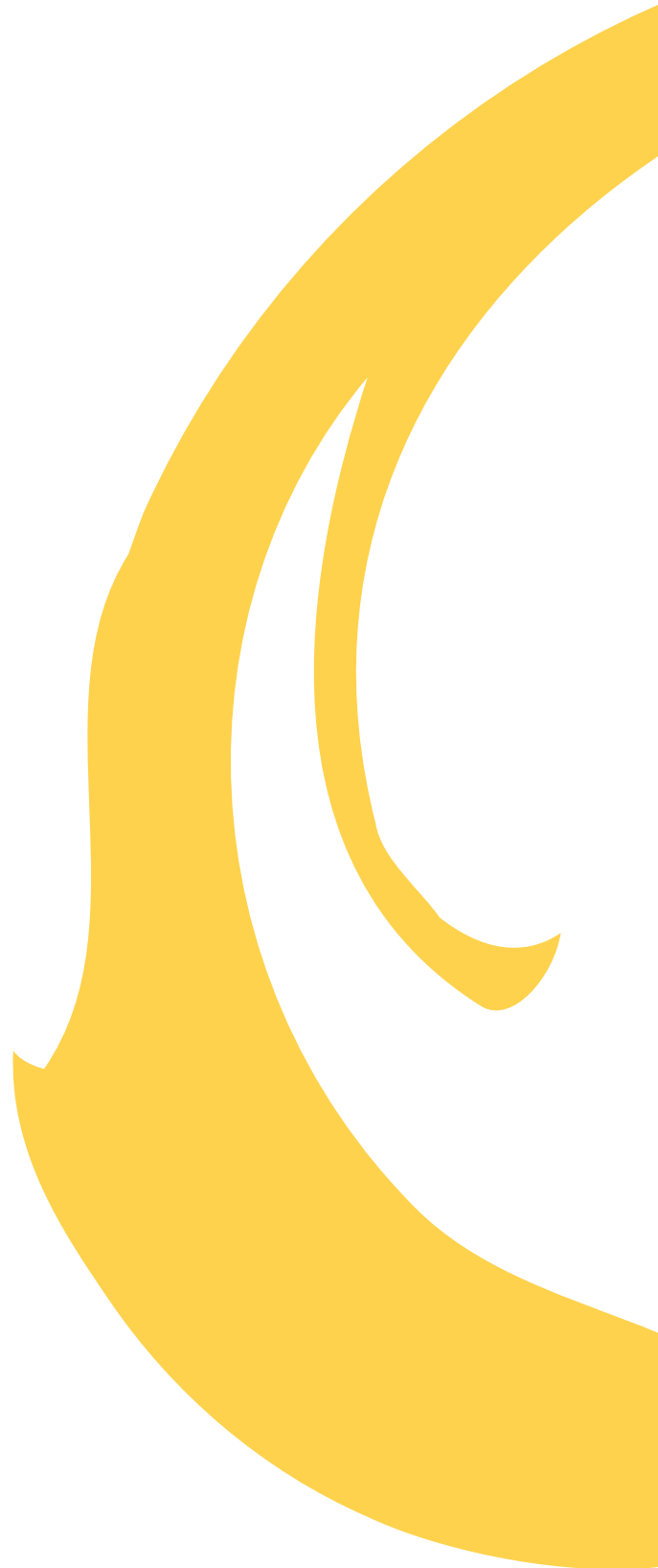
Coaching in Perspective

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Coaching in Perspective

The coaching industry has experienced a period of intense growth in recent years. With very few barriers to entry, limited regulation and a seemingly endless supply of clients it is little wonder that so many people are becoming coaches. It attracts a wide variety of practitioners like experienced CEOs, sporting legends and everyday people from the consulting, psychology and human resources sector. In fact, just about anyone who can hold a conversation can claim to be a coach in a service industry that is increasingly becoming more and more specialised. You can now engage an executive coach, a corporate coach, a business coach, a performance coach, a career coach, a life coach or a spiritual coach and the list keeps growing. In an environment of such rapid growth and few restraints there exists a great deal of opportunity for coaches and clients alike, however, there also exists a great deal of confusion, misconception and apprehension.

You may wonder how such a burgeoning industry developed in the first place. Don't managers have the time or skills to coach their people anymore? Have some companies decided to outsource this responsibility? Or is this just another example of the next wave of executive perks – are coaches just another corporate status symbol like the corner office or car space? And what does it take to become an executive coach anyway? Is this just a great money earner for retired executives eager to cash in on their reputation as high profile industry leaders? What about the explosion of coaching accreditation programs? This, after all, has been where the majority of money has been made. Individual coaches have not earned anywhere near the fortunes they have been led to expect. Is the industry in danger of earning a reputation for opportunism and misrepresentation as people jump on the coaching bandwagon eager to earn a living with scant regard for the value they provide or the damage they might deliver?

What is coaching?

Coaching is synonymous with sport. For any fan of team or individual sport the role of the coach is well understood and widely accepted. Effective coaching contributes to success on the sporting field. We know that sports coaches have strong track records and sound reputations in their chosen field. They also have a broad depth of experience and a well developed coaching skill set. If they lack any of these criteria then they simply don't get hired or they don't last. High profile teams and athletes demand coaches of the highest calibre, such roles are competitive and highly sought after.

So what about coaching in the business world? The sporting analogy, although a little well worn, is the easiest way to describe coaching in the corporate sector. Just as the effective sports coach contributes to success on the sporting field, the effective executive coach contributes to individual and organisational success. Put simply, coaching is a shared learning experience where personal change occurs through a process of discovery, planning, practice, review and reinforcement. Most coaching processes today incorporate all or some of these five stages.

Coaching is an activity that has often been provided internally by line managers or by some other internal consulting department, for example, human resources, learning and development, or a business improvement team. In recent times many organisations have been outsourcing this to external coaching providers. Some suggest that in an ideal world coaching should be delivered by line managers. However, in reality this may be difficult to achieve.

Some of the common reasons for engaging an external coach over an internal one include:

- Line managers who lack effective coaching skills
- Relationship issues between the line manager and the individual seeking coaching
- Managers who are reluctant to divulge a perceived weakness to a work colleague or superior
- Traditional group training solutions that have failed to deliver effective long-term behaviour change

Coaching can address a range of current issues, problems or concerns as well as help people focus on harnessing their potential, stretching their current capabilities or simply looking at a situation from a different perspective. Executive, corporate, business or performance coaching are the most common descriptions used in the corporate sector. But what does each of these really mean? Broadly speaking most coaching addresses the following three areas:

- Skill development: this is mostly 'technical' skill or knowledge focused learning, for example, how to manage a large scale acquisition, how to run a small business, how to develop more effective leadership skills.
- Performance improvement: this also addresses skill development but from the basis of a perceived gap in current performance levels, for example, how to develop better interpersonal skills, how to delegate more effectively, how to manage workplace stress, how to manage priorities better.
- Personal growth: this encompasses a wide area focusing on future potential, self-development, self-actualisation, motivation and achieving greater satisfaction from life, for example, career coaching, goal setting, work-life balance.

It's little wonder that various coaching descriptions are confusing and sometimes misleading. For example, is executive coaching only for executives? Is corporate the same as business coaching? And does performance coaching only focus on performance improvement? In practice such labels are used interchangeably and what becomes more relevant is the person's situation – is it a skill development, performance improvement or personal growth issue? Coaches need to be competent in all three areas since these often overlap or surface at unexpected moments throughout the coaching engagement. Executive coaching is challenging work and not unlike the high profile sports coach a leading executive coach needs to meet some stringent criteria.

What makes a good coach?

Successful sports and executive coaches share some common criteria. The most important of these include experience relevant to the coaching situation, well developed coaching skills and finally a sound track record in coaching others.

Relevant experience

Imagine that your favourite sports team recently hired a new coach who had never played any sport and had no idea about the rules or regulations of your sport. How comfortable would you be with their chances of winning the grand final this year? What about a senior executive who needs a coach, should he or she seek out someone who has worked at the same level, maybe even one level above? Should the coach have a business degree, a degree in psychology or an MBA? In short, when weighing up the importance of the coach's experience one needs to consider it in relation to the client's situation and the coaching objective.

If managing a large scale restructure is the coaching objective then someone with this 'technical' ability and experience would be a better fit than someone with no exposure in this area. Leadership development, for example, requires a coach with practical experience combined with the theoretical knowledge of leading others. In addition, it requires someone who can model these behaviours. This last point is critical yet too often neglected by many coaches. Imagine the coach who can't resist the urge to talk over others as he attempts to teach someone active listening skills. Coaching is all about application. Theories and models are important but if this is all the coach brings to the assignment then the client is better off reading a few good books on the subject.

Coaches also need to have a practical understanding of the client's work environment and the demands of their job. A coach can always acquire such knowledge throughout the assignment, however, those with previous exposure are more effective and achieve quicker results. Relevant experience, whether through business related education, employment as a manager within a similar environment or coaching assignments across several different companies, is an essential

prerequisite to successful executive coaching.

Successful coaches have knowledge in the subject area and exposure to the coaching environment. However, this alone is not enough to guarantee success as a coach. Witness the growing trend where many corporate executives have made a career change and established their own coaching practices. Some have been successful senior executives, MDs and CEOs in their own right. There can be little doubt to the claim made by many to have 'been there and done that', but just as the star athlete doesn't always make the best coach, relevant experience and knowledge is insufficient of itself.

Coaching skills

High profile captains of industry and sports stars have many things in common, they are successful, well respected and above all get results. Success is a combination of many factors some of which are related to coaching while others are not. Successful coaches require a specialised skill-set that industry or sporting exposure may not provide them with. Hence, success in one field does not automatically guarantee the same in executive coaching. An effective executive coach needs to possess and demonstrate advanced capability in four critical areas.

1. Interpersonal skills

Coaching demands a high level of interpersonal engagement. Success depends on the coach's ability to quickly establish rapport, build a relationship and develop trust over a relatively short period of time, often in as little as two or three one-hour sessions. Trust is the key attribute underpinning an effective coaching relationship and is one of the reasons an external coach may be more suitable than an internal one. An external coach has little vested interest in the outcomes of a coaching assignment other than to help someone achieve their goal. Internal interests often include superior-subordinate relationships, promotion decisions and performance management issues. Such internal factors contaminate the impartiality and confidentiality that effective coaching relies on.

As a coach your behaviours and actions are constantly on display and under assessment, therefore the need to role model appropriate behaviour at all times is essential. Imagine helping someone learn the skills required to manage their emotions more effectively if the coach cannot manage his during a coaching session. An experienced CEO turned coach with a reputation for hot headedness is an unlikely candidate for helping someone learn to control their emotional outbursts, they may however be excellent at coaching senior executives in managing company turnarounds. The coach's demonstrated behavioural skill set needs to closely match the coaching need.

Some essential communication skills include the ability to listen, comprehend and recall the issues that are most significant to the client. Such skills lay the foundation for developing trust over subsequent sessions. As a general rule, the coach should do significantly less talking than the client in the first few sessions, for example, at least 60 to 80 per cent listening. Listening and questioning go hand-in-hand. Well developed questioning techniques are an invaluable skill. The ability to establish 'conversational questioning' rather than an interrogative approach will further build a sound coaching relationship. At the end of each session the client should feel that they've discussed their situation in a way that is comfortable, unforced and non-judgemental. The ability to suspend judgement both verbally and non-verbally is central to building trust.

When selecting a coach you should be able to assess their interpersonal effectiveness at your very first meeting. If in any doubt keep looking.

2. Thinking skills

Often a major coaching outcome is the ability to view a familiar issue, problem or opportunity from another perspective. This can deliver that break-through moment whereby new insight can establish the impetus for substantial change and personal achievement. The coach is instrumental in establishing this condition. Effective coaches need well developed

conceptual, analytical and reasoning skills. In addition, they may require creative and design skills to help their clients think laterally. At any one time they may need to consider situations at the 'big picture' strategic level as well as comprehend the micro 'operational' environment. Clearly this level of applied thinking is not common to everyone and can lead to frustration in some instances. Consider, for example, a coach who is a 'big picture' conceptual thinker and is at a loss to provide her client with practical 'day-to-day' actions for managing his priorities.

Most executive coaches position themselves as problem solvers. This doesn't mean the coach has to solve the client's problems for them or provide all the answers. Advanced communication skills, especially 'reflective' questioning, helps the client arrive at a more holistic understanding of their situation and develop practical solutions. Problem solving in a coaching sense provides the client with a framework and the tools to solve problems on their own. The coach supports, follows up and recalibrates these tools but avoids making decisions for the client. In the same way that a sports coach doesn't join the field, the executive coach sits on the side line and monitors progress, gives feedback and provides encouragement.

Some situations may require the coach to provide answers, for example, when introducing an unfamiliar skill or where the client has no experience in the subject area. Effective coaches, however, are mindful of providing all the answers and inadvertently establishing a dependency relationship. Coaching is about knowledge and skill transfer, empowering others rather than solving their problems for them.

3. Behavioural tools and strategies

The sports coach has more than one strategy in his or her tool bag, not only a variety of plays and tactics but also the ability to anticipate, observe and create new ones. Similarly the executive coach who has only one or two strategies or who is too theoretical in applying these will struggle to meet their client's practical needs. Coaching is an applied skill – successful coaches adopt a practical mindset. But how do coaches learn such skills?

A short course in executive coaching does not develop coaches proficient in the diagnosis and application of various 'behavioural' tools and strategies. Such courses concentrate on coaching frameworks and skills – the technical skills of 'how' to coach, but not 'what' to coach. A graduate of such training will struggle to accurately identify the presenting behavioural issue and apply an effective learning strategy. For example, a coach might use the GROW model without fault but still fail to help her client apply useful strategies for dealing with his anxiety when public speaking. The reason for this is that she can follow a coaching process, the GROW model, but lacks the technical knowledge needed for analysing and applying a behavioural strategy – in this case, helping the client develop the skills to recognise and manage his emotions.

Like the sports coach, the executive coach needs a wide repertoire of tools and strategies to effectively meet their client's needs. These tools and strategies require a deeper understanding of human behaviour than the coaching frameworks and methods presented on most coaching accreditation programs. Most people can follow the GROW model – it's an excellent coaching process per se – but it's not a tool or strategy for changing behaviour. This is exactly what the coach needs to provide and depends to a large extent on his or her experience, formal education and technical abilities. How they attain this is less important than their ability to demonstrate such expertise across a variety of coaching situations. The over-emphasis on coaching accreditation and industry regulation obscures the fundamental requirement to have well grounded competency in applying behavioural tools and strategies.

4. Self-management skills

Coaches need to think on their feet whilst at all times knowing just where their feet are! It can be all too easy to get caught up in the emotions that arise during a coaching session. Talking about poor performance, an over-critical boss or workplace conflict brings a myriad of emotions to the fore. Effective coaches have a high degree of emotional self-awareness and the mechanisms in place to manage these. Client interactions will often evoke an emotional response

and coaches who are unaware of their own feelings are prone to getting caught up in the very behaviours they are trying to help modify. Unrecognised feelings of frustration, for example, can damage the coaching relationship and send conflicting messages. Lack of awareness is difficult enough, but the inability to manage one's emotions creates further complications. The need to maintain a non-judgemental perspective has already been mentioned. To side with your client as he angrily criticises his boss and to express, however subtly, a shared anger is not modelling appropriate behaviour and serves only to reinforce the very behaviours you are working to change. These are high level abilities and for most people take more than a coaching accreditation program to develop.

Self-awareness also applies to one's knowledge and skills. An effective coach knows his or her limitations. They work within their capabilities and avoid over-promising and under-delivering. This often presents a conflict of interest for the new coach as they struggle to establish a profitable coaching practice. Integrity and confidentiality are related to this issue as both are essential attributes in developing and maintaining trust with both the client and their organisation. Having the knowledge and skill to identify client symptoms that are beyond a coaching solution, for example, depression or acute anxiety, and the ability to refer where appropriate are also vital to delivering a professional service. Coaches who are unaware of such signs and symptoms risk doing considerable harm to their clients.

Finally, maintaining a client-centric approach to coaching is an important self-management ability requiring vigilant self-assessment. Too often inexperienced coaches have a 'game plan' in mind for their client – their expectations of where the client should be or what they should be doing or achieving. If such expectations are strongly held by the coach they run the risk of letting these override their clients'. In a sense they operate from their own 'headspace' rather than their client's. In this situation they are setting themselves up as the client's 'pseudo manager' and are not coaching from an impartial position but more subtly directing with a vested interest. As the client fails to meet the coach's expectations he or she becomes the target of their feelings of disappointment or frustration. Imagine the impact of a coach with poor emotional self-awareness and management – the coaching relationship becomes strained, ineffective and of little value to either party.

Track record

Major sporting teams don't stake their one shot at the grand final on an untested coach. Why should individuals and companies expect any less when engaging an executive coach? An effective coach needs to have demonstrated success across a range of coaching clients and situations. Ideally, the coach has exposure to a variety of industries and companies of varying size and complexity. These must include both the easy engagements and the hard ones.

An easy engagement is typically the highly motivated manager with good insight and the skills to apply new strategies to get quick results. The converse is a manager who feels the problem is someone else's and is only 'doing coaching' because their boss suggested it. Beware also the coach who has difficulty managing the length of the coaching engagement. You should expect some observable behaviour change within four to six sessions. Anything longer than this, with no result, should raise questions as to the coach's ability to effectively manage the hard cases. More coaching doesn't produce better results, it often creates unhealthy dependency relationships between the coach and client. Effective coaching is about empowerment.

Don't hesitate to ask for references and seek some confirmation that the coach has actually achieved the results he or she claims. Professional coaches will be more than happy to provide these whilst still maintaining the confidentiality of their client. Ask to speak with someone who has experienced the coach first hand, as a fee paying client not a 'training' client, and get a feel for how well they worked and what results were achieved. Finally, get some idea of the level of repeat business and referrals the coach has enjoyed. This will give you some indication of their reputation and their ability to help their clients get results.

So is coaching for you?

Coaching has the potential to be a more focused, relevant and cost effective solution than traditional forms of group learning. The one-to-one nature of coaching provides a more efficient way to customise learning for the individual as opposed to the one-size-fits-all approach of most group learning activities. Combined with self-measures or 360-degree feedback, coaching can optimise client buy-in to learning new behaviours. A series of four or five individualised sessions provides greater on-going structure and reinforcement of learning than one-off event training. Coaching can often be more cost effective than group learning because it has minimal impact on day-to-day business activity, it doesn't require travel and accommodation for out of town participants or the hiring of expensive training venues.

Companies need to be clear about executive coaching and the role it can play in developing organisational capability. It may not be the most appropriate solution in every situation. It's best applied at middle to senior leadership levels as this is often a key point of leverage for implementing organisational change. A self select approach often works best and considerable up-front influencing and buy-in is a critical key to success. Establishing and maintaining realistic expectations also ensures that executive coaching is kept in perspective. It is not a panacea for all management problems but a highly targeted solution designed to deliver behavioural change in key individuals.

There is a great deal of coaching on offer. Successful athletes and sporting teams think long and hard before selecting their coaches. Likewise successful companies and individuals need to ensure their coaches have the requisite experience, coaching skills and track record.

Suggested Reading

Fitzgerald, C. & Berger, J. 2002, Executive Coaching: practices & perspectives, Davies Black.

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Kilburg, R. 2000, Executive Coaching: Developing Managerial Wisdom in a World of Chaos, American Psychological Association.

Witmore, J. 2003, Coaching for Performance: GROWing People, Performance and Purpose, Third Edition, Nicholas Brealey.