

Tips for the top: Getting the most from executive coaching. By Matt Henkes

Executive coaching is beginning to be seen as less of a solution to a problem and more of a tool to help people realise their full potential. With increasing numbers of top-level executives having tried and benefited from it, Matt Henkes looks at how its effectiveness can be measured.

It wasn't too long ago that many saw business coaching as just the latest fad, soon to find itself condemned to the same pile as sparkly disco trousers and the CB radio. However, with increasing numbers of firms turning to coaches to help employees realise their full potential, is it something HR should be seriously considering for its executives?

Executive coaching has increased steadily since the late 1990s, despite some experts considering it to have a limited shelf-life. As proof of its growing popularity, a 2005 study from the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) suggested that almost 90 per cent of organisations employed coaching activities in their leader development strategies, with two-thirds hiring external coaches to work with more senior or high-potential employees.

"I cannot teach anybody, I can only make them think." Socrates

Gil Schwenk, principal consultant at the **Bath Consultancy Group**, believes its popularity could be due to the fact it is often more effective than simple, traditional training courses because the development is focused on the individual. However, it's not an either/or choice, he adds. "There's a place for both as they do different things," Schwenk explains.

The confusion seems to be over what coaching actually is, compared to mentoring or training. Isobel Rimmer, director of coaching firm Masterclass, describes it in terms of holding a mirror up to the person being coached. "They're seeing for themselves what they're doing and what they're thinking, and then making decisions on whether they like what they see and whether they need to change," she says. "The sharp HR people are very aware now of how coaching can be a very powerful way of working with people and raising the bar in what they do."

Choices

Coaching can come from within the organisation or from exterior consultants. Which you use will depend on your budget and what you want to achieve.

Although it is often cheaper in the long run to train up a cadre of coaches within your firm than to hire an outsider, it is worth considering that the relationship between an internal coach and an executive who may hold a fair amount of sway in the company is unlikely to be as fair and frank from both sides as it could be with an external coach. Senior executives are less likely to divulge their deepest professional fears to a subordinate.

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As a coach, your job is to challenge your subject. If you're working with a client as an external coach and you push them too far, you've lost one of your clients, says Schwenk. If you do that as an internal coach, you've lost your job. "It's extreme and rarely happens, but it's a concern that might be there for internal coaches," he adds.

Coaching is 'hip' at the moment, but is still a relatively new discipline. And with so many firms employing the approach, it's important not to just jump on the bandwagon. All parties must be clear on what is expected from the process, which is why discussions between HR, the coach and the coachee, can help define what these goals are. For example, if the goal is to modify a number of behavioural shortcomings, these must be agreed in the coaching contract.

Measuring

There are various ways to measure whether the sessions have been effective. Sharon Brockway, a senior consultant at the Roffey Park development consultancy, believes the trend for many firms is to look at the individual experience, often using one-to-one conversations between the coachee and HR to gauge effectiveness.

There are useful pieces of information HR practitioners can gain from these types of interviews. Even though it may seem quite a one sided view, it can show you if the coaching has been effective in the eyes of the individual. How effective that is in terms of their changed behaviour might be another story, but you are at least gaining a sense of their perception of the process.

HR's role in executive coaching:

- Do your research thoroughly.
- Consider whether one-to-one coaching or internal coach training is more effective.
- Engage executives from the beginning so they own decisions.
- Treat coaching as a perk not remedial – stress the benefits to individuals.
- Give executives a choice of coaches.
- Ask them to fill out feedback forms on the coaches.
- Create a form to make them think about their coaching needs.

Source: Carol Wilson, managing director, Performance Coach Training

Another approach becoming popular is to gather 360 degree information before and after the coaching process to glean any changes in behaviour or performance. The drawback to this, however, is the large amount of information that needs to be gathered and collated by HR. "Not all of it will necessarily apply to the coaching context," warns Brockway. "In that sense, it makes quite a lot of work for HR – separating out what is key for the coaching process and what isn't."

However, it is possible you won't have any specific aims defined at the beginning, depending on why you have employed a coach. Brockway says HR directors are increasingly turning to coaches as a way of helping senior figures reach their full potential, rather than to fix a problem. In this instance, there may not initially be any particular area that demands attention; the manager is already good at their job and the specific skills or behaviours they need to work on will only become apparent as the sessions progress.

This is a relatively new approach in the coaching world and an area where there is currently much discussion. "Some people are saying there's advantage in keeping it loose and letting the goals develop as you go through it," says Schwenk. "I think there's merit in that."

However, he admits he is "concerned" by this approach. Firms are investing a lot of money into the process while not being clear about why they want coaching in the first place.

Coaching can be a good way to help senior people who often have no one in whom to confide openly about their hopes and feelings. "The benefits of having someone to listen are clearly very hard to measure," says business psychologist Sherridan Hughes. "But if someone feels that they benefited from the coaching and are not able to put a finger on exactly how, that should not be discounted."

Further information:

[Association for Coaching](#)

[International Coach Federation](#)

[European Mentoring and Coaching Council](#)

HR Zone 28-Aug-2007 Categories: [Employee Development](#)